

***Paper-Thin: the Contingency of Post-Industrial Realities***

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

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May 25, 2018

**Expected Date of Graduation**

May, 2018

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Thesis  
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.24  
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.563

### *Abstract*

The rust belt and its cities have often been characterized as little more than failures. Histories written and research done about this region have likewise sought to show that this is the case, and further provide the details of how exactly this failure happened. In this thesis, I shall contend that this narrative about the rust-belt city covers over a more subversive truth: the rust belt did not fail, it is not a unique occurrence—it rotted from the inside out because of oppressive forces placed onto it, created by inequalities inherent to capitalism. This rot has not gone away, but continues to work in more hidden ways within our society. In order to address this rot and the shortsighted narratives which it creates about the rust-belt city and further reveal the ways traditional research methods silence the rust-belt residents, I critique an influential history of Detroit written by Thomas Sugrue. In doing so, I show the shortcomings and dangerous potential of understanding the city only from an outside perspective as a totalized object. I then respond to this critique by engaging in a multi-sited critical ethnography of five rust-belt cities, the marginalized people who make their lives within them—including homeless men and women, Black street artists, squatters and anarchists, and the working poor.—and the individuals who attempt to work with and for these people. From these narratives I work to extract new theoretical frameworks with which to reexamine and critique the study of rust-belt cities and the system of capitalism as a whole. These new frameworks provide new lenses and axes that cut across geographies, peoples, times, and politics in ways that both unify and divide them, revealing new potentials and possible futures—trajectories, lines of flight. What is likewise shown in this study is the radical contingency of these futures and the people who work to bring them about; therefore what this project seeks to do is amplify these people's stories and sharpen the critique that they bring with their lives such that their work can be remembered as a key step past the oppressive restraints that capitalism places on human society, and ensure that their names shall not be forgotten. What is to follow is their story, a deep fragment of the continually shifting narrative that is the rust belt, that is U.S. society, that is our collective identity.



### *Acknowledgements*

To Sarah E. Vitale, PhD, for teaching me to be a radical, for helping me grow and develop, for mentoring me, for sharing many emotional conversations, for editing this thesis, and for giving me hope about the future. This project would not be possible without you.

To Wes Janz, PhD, for opening my eyes, for challenging me to think more openly, for showing me Flint, for all the cups of coffee, and for the laughs you brought along the way. This project would not be possible without you.

To Olon Dotson for showing me other ways of doing things, for introducing me to so many people, for always finding ways to be positive despite all the negativity, and for the rad playlists. This project would not be possible without you.

To Noah Patterson for the writing tips, the piercing critical questions, the friendship, and for accompanying me on one of many week-long trips through the rust belt. This project would not be possible without you.

To Laurie Slightom & Daniel Slightom for all the funding, the tough political conversations, and the continued love and support. This project would not be possible without you.

To all the people that I have met along the way, people like Brighton and Kenny and Kat and Matt and Rob and Daniel and Betsy and Aaron, people who continue to make substantive change and offer radical critique of capitalism and the society it has created. This project would not be possible without you.

To Imette St. Guillen, Timothy Thomas, Samuel DeBose, Afrikka Hardy, Anith Jones, Teaira Batey, Kristine Williams, Tracy Martin, Sonya Billingsley, Tanya Gatlin, Terence Crutcher, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Eric Harris, Tony Robinson, Romain Brisbon, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, Michael Brown Jr., Eric Garner, Erica Garner, and countless others. You shall not be forgotten. This thesis remembers and mourns your loss.

Black lives matter. This project would not be possible without you.

Finally, to all those people whose stories remain untold, to all those people who have become victim, who have been killed, who have died, who have disappeared, who have vanished or been made to vanish; you are not forgotten. This thesis remembers and mourns your loss. This project would not be possible without you.

## ***Paper-Thin***

*the Contingency of Post-Industrial Realities*

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### *Process Analysis*

I began this project in the fall of 2016 quite by accident.

At that time I was in an architecture studio taught by an influential professor of mine, Dr. Wes Janz. In that studio, we took a week-long trip to seven rust-belt cities. Along the way we met with critical leaders and homeless individuals and mentally ill veterans and academics and community organizers; we saw industrial ruins and collapsed homes and brick scavenging and cemeteries and offices and memorials.

This trip changed everything for me; it shocked and amazed me in ways that I now find quite naïve. I could not understand how I had never known these places existed, how I could have lived my entire life in places so near ones like those that I had just entered into and never met people like this, never seen places like that.

This trip helped me realize that life in the United States is so much more complicated than it appears on the surface.

Since that trip, I have not been able to stop thinking about these places and the people who live in them. I have returned to them again and again; I have driven tens of thousands of miles, read thousands of pages, written many reflections, sent numerous emails, and made many calls—all with the goal of trying to better understand why these places exist, how they came to be, and what they might indicate about the state of our country as a whole.

This project has changed everything for me.



It has reshaped my politics, altered the trajectory of my future, and created unforeseen possibilities for myself. Since I began this project over two and a half years ago, I am no longer the same person I was when I began.

And it began by accident.

It began because I was forced to confront the people and places that are, most often, hidden from us.

It began because I met the people that we have been told are worthless, forgettable, violent even, and came away seeing them as exactly the opposite.

It began because I was shown, in a visceral way, how deep the lie that “this is the land of the free” is.

No one here is free.

What this project has become is an attempt to understand these contradictions better. It is a way for me to come to terms more fully with the duality of this country and to probe more deeply into how this duality has shaped my own identity and my perceptions of the world, how it *continues* to shape me.

This project has become, in a way, a search for my own identity and how that identity relates to the narratives that get told about the United States in general, particularly the Midwestern portion of the rust belt, because this is the place that has is my home, this is the place that has come to define so much of my being.

This project has become fundamentally personal, and for many people that is something that might be seen as negative, because I might be too close to see certain things, to be



“objective” about these kinds of places. For me, this proximity has been the most productive kind of wellspring, because I do not think that you can study something fully without at some point becoming being integrally tied to it, I do not think that you can study the rust belt and the people that live in it and not be affected, I do not think that you can enter the rust belt, hear the people who are living in it tell their story, and walk away unscathed.

I certainly have not.

I have been cut deeply by these experiences, and what is to come in these pages is, in some sense, coated with drops of my own blood:

I am part of the rust belt.

I am part of the system of control.

I am entrapped by the system of control in equal measure.

And so to resist these bonds, to pull my body through them, is to cut myself, it is to be cut; I cannot study this place and not be cut.

I cannot study this place and not be changed.

No one can study this place and not be changed.

Such is the nature of the rust belt.

It is stained by blood.

*Part I—*  
***Walking Corpses, Living Dead***

## Rot

There is a strip of land here in the United States, beginning somewhere in the depths of the Pennsylvania mountains and extending far to the northwest, which does not seem to belong to the image of prosperity which this country has long prided itself upon ("the streets are paved with gold"). This strip cuts through the center of between eight and twelve states, depending on what map you refer to. It knows no geographic boundary, it is not held back by rivers or forests, it does not care what or whom it consumes. Some call it the rust belt; indeed, it is a red mark, a wound, a gash. Inside this strip lie the leviathan husks of once great industrial centers and the decimated fragments of the once-proud cities that housed them. Cities of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people across millions of acres of land stand within the boundaries of this tarnished band.

For many, this belt represents an aberration. Some say that it is a result of a post-war economy that failed to compete.<sup>1</sup> Others say that it is the evidence of an implosion caused by the pressures of technological automation coupled with international competition.<sup>2</sup> Others say that it is the result of growing racial tensions spurred on by the post-war push for suburbanization.<sup>3</sup> Still others might say that the failure of the rust belt is the result of a deadly ideological drive embedded in the nature of the United States, a drive that is in fact the life-force of an international machine called "capital."<sup>4</sup> No matter whom you ask, however, there seems to be

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Beauregard, "On the Verge of Catastrophe," in *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 135–55.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, "The End of Work," in *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York, NY: Tarcher Perigee, 1996), 3–14.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, 2nd ed., Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives 18 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).



one point of profound agreement: the rust belt is a failure. Though they may disagree on the exact scope and meaning of this failure, what seems certain to the people who have constructed these arguments is that it cannot be understood as anything other than an end, a collapse, an implosion, a crack in the portrait of this still-proud country.

The rust belt is a systems failure; conflicting and contradictory forces—of capital and the social alienation it institutes, the social regulation and maintenance which it then requires, the forms of control it relies upon for the conformity of these communities to these systems—tore apart the spaces they themselves had shaped. Each failure is inextricably linked to that central vein, that regulatory body, the originator and coordinator of all U.S. social systems: capital. It is the driving force behind the construction of our cities and our communities; it is the force that breathed Gary out onto the shifting dunes that once lined the lakeshore, the force that bred the neighborhood divisions of Detroit, the force that built literal walls between neighbors and poisoned schools full of children; it is the force that tore through the fabric of Black communities in Cincinnati as the dying inner-city was bled out by white flight.<sup>5</sup>

These systems did not just collapse; they *decayed* from the inside out. Understanding this “failure” as decay likewise must force us to reconsider the narratives built around the situation of the rust-belt city; it is not something which “just happened” or was unique and momentary, a situation isolated to the confines of a neatly demarcated boundary. No, the rust belt’s decline is unlike the collapse of a structure or a body that occurs suddenly and at any moment, which can take us by surprise. The rust belt decayed, and decay requires time. Decay is a *process* that must be precipitated; there must be reactants and fuel—a consumer and a consumed—which are

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<sup>5</sup> S. Paul O’Hara, *Gary, the Most American of All American Cities* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011); Robert Shackleton, *The Book of Chicago* (Altenmünster, DE: Jazzybee Verlag, 2016); Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.



mutually destroyed over long periods as both are transformed into new products. If we reject the stories of the rust belt which claim that it collapsed and instead looked to resituate these cities into a narrative of decay, we can begin to understand the city as a product, not of some unknown and unanticipated “problem,” but one that has been generated by a set of forces. What are these forces? I claim that they were the naturally putrefying and irreconcilable contradictions that comprise capitalism. The contradictions that indoctrinate the worker and institute social inequality, which build the city in such a way that it limits access to some and delimits it for others, which write and rewrite our supposedly shared laws to benefit the growth of capital, which further discipline and punish those who move too close to the critical margins, which regulate and deny the human body from attaining true and independent freedom; they are but some of the forces which alienate the human species from itself.

Yet these forces remain largely hidden to most of us in our society. For those caught up in the system of capital, its inherent contradictions do not appear as contradictions; they remain invisible, or appear as unquestionable natural conditions of the world. The world appears to them as the absence of contradiction, even as these contradictions manifest themselves physically. Contradiction can be seen eating away at the body, can be seen in the weariness trapped in their eyes, in their bitterness towards the unknown, in their apathy towards the world. And so, as in a tree which has been eaten from the interior—a tree that may still stand green and tall in the summer, but which suddenly cracks in two under the strain of winter winds, revealing a rot that has been slowly at work for years—this decay which bubbles up inside of the rust belt, this decay which capital necessitates, appears to them as collapse. It is easier to point to that moment when the reactants and the fuel have reached equilibrium, that point at which the entire corpse has been transmuted into a wholly different object, and say that there has been a catastrophic failure—a

collapse, something localizable and unique—than to say that this situation has been bred, that the world was not in fact organized how we thought it was, that this issue has grown and multiplied over years of neglect: that this is a subterranean problem. And so we hear about the character of the rust-belt city in this way: they collapsed due to localized issues, they are an aberration, a cancer which has been cut out, and now we must rebuild.

But, as new studies into the nature of this decay have shown us, this is not the case; the issue is not localized, it was not a collapse.<sup>6</sup> It has an origin. It grew and spread across the nation, a blight which slowly expanded and took root; it sent out initial shocks in the form of race riots or worker strikes or factory closings; it warned us of its presence. Yet we remained unaware of it, chose instead to reaffirm the origin of the issue and push harder and further, accelerating the decay until it reached that moment when the body was transfigured: a crack appeared in the face of the country, tremulous and slow, a welt which refused to subside. Indeed, rust is the best name for this belt of land; it is a red mark, a wound, a gash, a fount of blood which now lies exhausted upon the land.

What we must understand is that this rot did not end at the boundaries of what we now know as the rust belt; it continues to fester, hiding in the words that pass from mouth to mouth telling us that Detroit could not have happened anywhere else, that the hemorrhage of industry from the area was caused by market forces and not be the market itself. In these words, the contradictions of capitalism are glossed over, allowed to return to the subterranean hiding place of the everyday; but this contradiction still shapes our cities, still builds literal walls between neighbors, still warns of the danger of seeing the rust belt first hand—it might wake you up.

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<sup>6</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.



There is still so much more rich fuel to burn, still so much more labor to extract, still so many other bodies to transform—walking corpses, living dead.

Capital has one single life impulse, the tendency to create value and surplus-value, to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour. Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.<sup>7</sup>

So long as this system lays hold of our lands, indoctrinates our young, and controls our shared bodies of law, we cannot escape the inextricable contradictions which the system relies upon: we will continue to be alienated from ourselves and others, will continue to suffer as inequality grows, will maintain the oppressive institutions which allow the system to feed: walking corpses, living dead. How long will it be until this rot reaches another equilibrium, until the change it affects by degrees and margins can be seen with our own eyes, until it wakes us up to the issue that has festered and ossified in our society for so long? Will we be too late to cut it out, that unchecked and malignant growth, and institute restorative processes that halt the decay? Will we be able, in the midst of this decay, to even build communities that are healthy? Or will the taint of this decay remain as a stain upon us? Will this stain allow the decay to reawaken and hide, continuing to feed off our shared life force?

It seems clear that, as a society, we remain unsure of what to do about this decay. It is a daunting and murky task: to begin to make a new society out of the pieces of one built on the backs of oppressed peoples and toxic policies, one that had been built with the belief that it would infinitely grow and prosper, unchecked for decades.<sup>8</sup> Do we begin with cities like Camden, New Jersey; Gary, Indiana; East St. Louis, Illinois, and its overshadowing companion,

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), 163, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> O'Hara, *Gary*.

St. Louis, Missouri; Muncie, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; Flint, Michigan; Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati, Ohio; Scranton, Pennsylvania; Detroit, Michigan; East Chicago, Indiana; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; cities that have become the obvious face of this widespread problem, cities so numerous and diverse in populations and issues that there seems to be no end? What's more, the list of names could, and does, go on: too many cities suffering from the sickness of their physical and social infrastructure now cope with factional and fractured populations, slumping revenues, debts and bankruptcy, rising levels of pollution, corrupt governments, increased levels of violence, the tatters of inefficient and structurally racist policing, a psychology akin to one found in zones of war—and on and on, still more seemingly insurmountable problems which have become the substance of everyday community life for thousands.<sup>9</sup> For those faced with the prospect of revolution or death comes the following problem: how can we begin to patch, or perhaps tear apart and burn, the fabric of a society that is as vast and complex, as still seemingly in control and on the rise, as the United States, in a holistic way? It seems an insurmountable task, a leviathan issue.

Walking corpses, living dead.

Nevertheless, the natural response to these readily apparent problems is to seek solutions, to suss out the source of the decay and cut it out, to reform and rebuild the structures and systems that led to the bloody wound of the rust belt. A streak that killed the promise of the so-called “American Dream” for untold millions. Yet new issues, possibly products of the very system which we seek to critique, arise in this search: the city becomes seen as the point of concern; it is pinned down, localized, given a historical account which is but an indication of even more

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<sup>9</sup> Neil C. Kalt and Sheldon S. Zalkind, eds., *Urban Problems: Psychological Inquiries* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976).



macroscopic historical trends. The city is characterized as an entity unto itself, located as a point on a spectrum deviating from a perceived and fictitious “perfect city”—a utopian vision, an impossible construct. Academics talk about “the city” as a formal concept; they discuss it as a mute and largely dead object around which they gather to poke and prod to test out their theories and ideas about collapse and ruin.

What is lost in this view—the one which looks at policy and history, which characterizes decay as collapse, which looks to geography and movements and trends and figures—is the life of the city itself. The city becomes fixed as a social concept, despite the fact that what composes it is a network of constantly moving, undeniably alive relationships among people. These relationships and individuals are what give birth to the city. The inescapable problem of understanding the city as an entity distinct from the lived experiences and daily encounters of those who construct it is the fact that it *misses the city altogether*. The city escapes definition: “the places people live in are like the presence of diverse absences.”<sup>10</sup> When we study “the city,” we inevitably cut it off from its current life, the people who compose it and activate it with their lived experience. *They* are who compose its history and write its policies, *they* are what constitute the body to be recorded—and yet they cannot be reduced down to these products: there is, inevitably, a new shift in their composition, a series of disjunctions which change the fundamental nature of the social body and its products—the city is irrevocably motile. And thus, even as I write this story, the city is again on the move. It is no longer the space that I have visited: new people have entered it and left it, new policies have been enacted, others remain unenforced, and still others are simply forgotten. People come and go, people are born and others

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<sup>10</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 108.

die, and so the city changes; it is a complex body composed of flows and energies; it cannot be written down in mere histories without losing that essential substance: the people.

In writing the city down, in seeking to understand the problems and situations that face the everyday pedestrian, in attempting to institute revolution through the discursive recording of the city as an entity, we commit an injustice. The people whose lived experiences are in fact the substance of the city are prevented from telling *their* histories, from constructing *their own* Gary or Cleveland or Detroit: it is not up to them to say why the city “failed.” In writing the city down, we see a dual exposure, a false image of the city where two distinct bodies are active: the city itself, which orders and governs the actions of the people, and the people who live in it—yet for those who truly experience the city on the ground, the two are inseparable. It is the act of fixing the city onto paper, the operation of viewing the city from afar that creates the false image that has for so long governed our view of the city, that there is an entity over and above the people which we can manipulate in order to control and regulate them.

Worse still, for some it is only this macroscopic view, this discourse of “decline,” that can give meaning to the cities that exist today; without the view from above, the notion of the city as a separate entity over and above the people, divorced from the lives of the inhabitants, would be impossible to see. It is a view from nowhere: if we stood on the ground of these places, took in their imperfections, engaged with the city in fact, we would not be able to find this amorphous and aqueous concept.<sup>11</sup> What is the city if not a space of possibility, a construction of our own making—one influenced by our movements, movements that leave behind the traces of capital and policy and history? The people who in fact live on the ground in these spaces, whose

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<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 34–49.



lives are deeply and inextricably linked with the policies and histories that these academic texts say is only visible from afar, know the reality of this decay in ways that the mute texts and dry pages of these books can never capture or understand: they are the subjects of the story, the authors of the real, the caretakers who must pick up the pieces in the aftermath of what may be the largest casualty of our continued internal decay. A rot that spreads imperceptibly beneath our very feet.

If the city isn't the histories we have told about it, then what is it? And what can it be?

This is precisely the question this text is first and foremost concerned with. Beginning with the premise that our contemporary understandings of the rust belt and its cities are insufficient, it will be the mission of this project to answer the question "how should we be and to whom should we be looking for greater understanding?" By being on the ground in the rust belt and talking to the people whose lives continue to shift and change its future, I believe that it is possible to understand not only what has led us to the situation of decay that grips this region, but also to understand the radical possibilities for the critique of capitalism that emerges from the rust belt and its inhabitants. In telling the stories of people living in the rust belt and in allowing their voices to shape our understanding of the city, we reject the shortcomings of the discourse of "the city" and the injustices that have been committed upon the real people and places that get looked over by the scholars behind this discourse. Instead of attempting, like these scholars, to find a whole and "objective" view of the city, something which restricts it to a constructed and partial history, something that replaces the voices of the people with mute commentary, this text instead embraces the fragmentary nature of the city and accepts that since the time that these stories have been recorded, others have arisen and been lived within the city—and so the city will again change, as it must, shaped by the lives of the human beings who make it up.

Any story of the city must be fragmentary and subjective, capable of being interpreted, charged with overt tensions and opinions and ideologies; they must be this way because this is how the city appears to us as human participants within it: motile and aqueous, in need of constant reimagining by the citizen so that its spaces might be converted from foreign and alien and two-dimensional outlines into habitable and complex and concrete places. The city is a messy construct that must be *deconstructed* and reinterpreted in order to be understood and in order to be *lived within*. What's more, the valences which mark the narratives we hear about the occupants of the city (who likewise construct the city in their daily life) allow us to understand how *they* inhabit it and infuse it with meaning, meanings which inevitably must change the way that this citizen must then understand and interact with the city—any inhabitation of the city is not objective, it is not easy nor is it passive. Inhabiting the city requires emotion, requires a charged experience, the assertion of a subjectivity, the engagement with space as an occupier of it, and the demand of recognition as this very kind of occupant. Lived spaces are full of emotion. Thus we cannot tell stories about lived spaces that are not likewise emotional. We must allow this charged nature of inhabitation to reshape our understandings of the city, and to highlight just how little we can know about the city as outside observers of it: to us, the city remains two-dimension, an outline, an object to be scrutinized, but to the citizen who makes their life within it, the city is full (even overflowing) of complexities and emotions and charges; thus reading these charges offers us one possible vector of force with which to enter the city and move among its inhabitants; *feeling with* the occupant allows us, in some minute way, to *be like* the occupant. It is a way in.

If we must rely upon the occupant to give us this experience of space, then what must be understood, before one can even begin to engage with such a project, is that these spaces and the



people within them are not some foreign being—the “city dweller.” They are not the stories that we have told about them; they are not helpless, nor are they hopeless, nor are they aggressive and uneducated. Forget the language of collapse and ruin and loss that dominates the discussion of the physical conditions of these cities. Forget the stories of engrained violence and self-inflicted destruction and irredeemable people. These stories and words cannot and do not capture the people I have entered into dialogue with, nor the spaces that they inhabit. Think instead of fecundity and possibility, of tension and friction, of pain and relief, of solidarity and community, of isolation and contingency. The citizens of the rust belt are not fixed collections of properties—of which dangerous, doomed, and worthless are perhaps the most common—they are sets of dialectical forces and energies, compounds and vectors which daily come into direct conflict or contradiction with each other and the places in which they are active; they are the products of the populations and individuals that live inside of them, people who are themselves forces. It is precisely this daily tension of the rust-belt city which prevents it from being the city of these academic stories; it continues to evolve.

What will follow is a counter-proposal. Instead of looking to the voices relegated to the archives, to the lifeblood now oxidized on the pages of bills and measures, to the traces of the flow of money or populations over time and space, I have looked to the people who make their lives in the spaces so many others have abandoned, people whose voices continue to be overlooked in the study and description of these spaces, whose lives are caught up in the space that many only write about. What I have found in their lives and practices are radical possibilities for change; every day these individuals do not only discuss how we might critique and abolish the systems which create the inequalities and injustices which surround us, they practice liberation in actuality. With their every breath they change the way we must think about property

and ownership, about what it means to know and to teach, about the role of art and space, about the power of solidarity and community, about the construction of society, about the future projects we must undertake as a nation. While others have been speculating, they have been putting their lives even further into danger in order to affect real change.

Yet what I also found is that these lives are in tension; the societies and future projects which they are attempting to bring about are being threatened. The encroachment on these rust-belt cities of renewed investment and gentrification threaten this possibility of radical change from coming into fruition; it puts into jeopardy the cities-that-might-become from the lives of people. Even further, the creation of system-supported programs for the reintegration of people from the margins—programs designed to retrain them for work within the new industries throughout the region, to forced slavery via mass-incarceration, and public welfare initiatives that recreate the placating effects of Marcuse’s “welfare state”—has begun to reduce this radical possibility and prevent the critique that arises as a natural consequence of living life in uncontrolled spaces.<sup>12</sup> These individuals, who by nature of their contingent situation have the greatest opportunity to bring about real and lasting change, are becoming increasingly contingent. Many of them whom I have had the privilege to know have simply gone missing, or have vanished for a time only to resurface miles away and years later in a weakened or inescapable position. Others have simply died.

The rate at which human life can be simply wiped out is astonishing, soul-crushing. It is this knowledge, that these contingent people might soon simply vanish, killed by a set of forces that for so long have been diametrically set against them, which gives this project its extreme

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<sup>12</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 63–74.

exigency. It is not just an academic endeavor, a search for greater knowledge which drives me to do this work. Underneath it all, there is an imperative moral weight which compels me to tell these stories, to record the lives of people, to set these names in writing: Brighton, Aaron, Kenny, Betsy, Nikki, Kat; the list can never be complete. These names force us to realize that beneath all this talk of ruin and parsing of policy there are *real people* whose lives are continually forgotten, whose deaths likewise will be simply forgotten. These individuals are setting the foundation for a future society that for so long we have simply theorized about, they have seen the failure of this social system firsthand: and so they have set the cornerstone of the next one; may we act in time to build upon it, lest it become a tombstone as well.

We owe them much more than empty promises and insincere words, we owe them respect, our attention, and possibly our lives.

What is to follow is but one part of their story.

What is to follow is an elegy.

What is to follow is a fragment of the story.

What is to follow is not a recording, a writing down, of the city.

What is to follow are the stories of real people.

What is to follow is one person's search for hope.

What is to follow is a discovery of pain.

What is to follow is the beginning. But it might also be the end.



### Icarus, Daedalus

In the preface to the 2005 edition of his seminal work, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, urban historian Thomas Sugrue revisits the Detroit neighborhood where his parents were raised; the neighborhood where his father grew up, the neighborhood where his great-aunt used to live. He recounts the experience of seeing the ruins of his father's childhood home, the outline of the brick foundation which marked the spot where his great aunt's home once stood, all overrun with waist-high prairie grasses and wildflowers. Whole areas of this neighborhood are now meadow, but among these fields sit "postage-stamp"-sized "oases" of manicured lawns; he sees Black teens and children playing basketball on a makeshift backboard nailed to a telephone pole.<sup>13</sup> He seems, for a moment, to genuinely mourn the loss of this space, a space which formed and shaped him has been lost to time, a casualty of the long and precipitous decline which has befallen the city.

This vignette, the only one in which Sugrue explores the city in person, lasts for but two short paragraphs before the text moves on. He next discusses macroscopic historical events, cites census data about the racial makeup of this neighborhood, talks about new urban redevelopment measures that have begun to rework the physical fabric of the city.<sup>14</sup> In the ensuing chapters and pages, we lose touch altogether with the meadow that has replaced his great aunt's house, we can no longer see the physical fabric of the city—itsself lost in the weeds of an overgrown history—as Sugrue outlines the beginnings of what he would come to call the urban crisis. Like the preface, the book divorces itself from the space of the city and the lives of its residents.

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<sup>13</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, xxxiii.

<sup>14</sup> Sugrue, xxxiii–xlix.

As I would later be told by a lifelong resident and social activist in Detroit, Sugrue's book "has no people in it."<sup>15</sup> Instead, Sugrue writes about the economic and political situations that gave birth to the collapse of the city; he charts out the exact covenants and written inequalities structured into our laws and regulations, the ones that sowed the seeds of disaster. He tells us that his book "is a guide to the . . . unresolved dilemmas" facing rust-belt cities.<sup>16</sup> We can now wonder, having seen his intimate personal connection with the city in actuality, why does he do this? He says that it is because the history of postwar cities in the United States has not been adequately examined; we have not yet come to truly understand what caused the fall of the cities which encompass what is now known as the rust belt.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this stated intention, it seems that in this work Sugrue is attempting to come to terms with that brick line which he saw inscribed in the grasses of that now empty neighborhood. Like so many others, the shock of the physical devastation of these places, especially such personal ones, has forced him to ask what happened. He wants to know how it is possible, in one of the most affluent countries in the world, for his family's homes to simply vanish, leaving behind little more than a trace in the ground, a shadow on the block. His work to uncover the secret histories and destructive policies that bred the urban crisis which faces Detroit and so many other cities like it seems fundamentally personal. And yet it is told from afar, teased out from the veins of the city's numerous histories, condensed into a view which can only be held if one stands at a distance from the Black children shooting hoops on the corner of that vacant lot.

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<sup>15</sup> See "Rob" in the Detroit section of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Sugrue, 14.



The city which Sugrue discusses is not the same Detroit as the one which these young people know and live in every day; Sugrue's Detroit is a concept. His search for understanding, his desire to know what happened, and his apparent search for answers have led him far away to a place where he now has risen high over the city to see it in a light that no ordinary pedestrian can see it: he is

An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.<sup>18</sup>

What Sugrue's distance from the city allows is "objectivity": the ability to turn the city into a passive object, mute and silent, a thing into which he—as the active subject—can penetrate and investigate. It allows him the ability to claim knowledge and understanding, to draw conclusions, to map out zones and thread together correlative events that can be pieced, molded together into Truth: what lies hidden and unspoken in the city of the blind pedestrian, whose movements Sugrue can chart and diagram, speculate and ruminate upon, can now be clearly said.

What do we see in this vision of the city? We see inequality and segregation written into the fabric of the city, distinct regions and communities built to exclude the Black, Latinx, Asian, and other minority populations of the city from wealth and land ownership.<sup>19</sup> We observe the slow bleeding wound of job loss and employment discrimination made worse by increasing technological revolution in industrial production.<sup>20</sup> We witness the flight of white residents from the inner city, the emptying out of the city's coffers, the rise of violence and poverty in the heart

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<sup>18</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 33–56.

<sup>20</sup> Sugrue, 89–178.



of the city.<sup>21</sup> We are given a glimpse into the future as these visions are wrapped neatly into a narrative that implicates our present and proscribes our future actions: “history is a process, ongoing, that at once opens up possibilities and constrains our choices in the present. To come to grips with the problems and promises of our cities, we must grapple with the past as a means to engaging with the present.”<sup>22</sup> Sugrue’s work gives us wings that allow us to fly over the city, to understand it as a total concept, to view it as a holistic product in a way which only this objective view (the city as object) could give us.

Yet Michel de Certeau’s warning rings in our ears—we are too much like Icarus, whose joy at the gift of flight led him to such great heights that he could but only fall. The question comes

Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth, crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below? An Icarian fall. . . . Is the immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer. The panorama-city is a “theoretical” (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. The voyeur-god created by this fiction . . . must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them.<sup>23</sup>

Is Sugrue’s city real? Or is it only a projection, an image, a simulacrum? We are given the sight, the objective distance, the vision of a god who is allowed to weave stories and project futures from a constructed and false version of the ground we inhabit. It is a thin sort of “Truth,” a vantage point which many assume as the whole truth itself. This view from on high, this view from nowhere is so tempting, so alluring to us; we who build towers, who paint perspectives from above, who thrill at the thought of heights because they give us the illusion that there is in

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<sup>21</sup> Sugrue, 181–230.

<sup>22</sup> Sugrue, 259–72.

<sup>23</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 92–93.

fact an objective perspective: they allow us to step back from our own murky interactions with the world and achieve the vision of a god, to be an omnipotent and omnipresent knower. Yet what view do we paint? What knowledges get included in the picture? For whom is the concept-city built? The voyeur's position from on high excludes certain realities and truths, it forgets certain myths, certain lived realities that are present and active on the ground, that must be experienced and encountered to be understood. What is seen from above, more often, is the systematic interrelationship, the inner workings of a vast machine, the image of the city as a dichotomous structure opposed as an order meant to regulate the activity of the people on the ground. In this diagram, the projection of society onto a flat plane which can be seen from above, we are kept from lived experience, but are given access to other bodies of knowledge that cannot be seen on the ground. What appears to be seen from above is the perfection of a diagram, the clarity of a drawing; yet if we looked closer we would see transgressions of this structure, crossed boundaries, imperfect applications of the rules and norms which can be seen from on high.

What realities hide from the objective observer? It seems that Sugrue's portrait of Detroit is total and uncompromising; we are brought in on the secret, given access to the processes and decisions that justify the existence of that brick line, the foundation, the memory of his aunt's home. The absences of those two homes, two holes in the city, represents the loss of something fundamental to who he is as a person. Upon turning the last page of *Origins*, it seems possible to patch those holes in this reality; now that we have been made aware of the practices and policies that created this crisis, we can start a fresh page, write and rewrite new regulations that can undo the harms of the past, implement new policies that allow for a different kind of flourishing to



occur in these devastated places. From the ashes of the city, the ruins of Sugrue's grandparents' home, we might yet rebuild something worth living in.

Yet we must pause. The question comes, for whom is this account written? Who is being told about the conditions that caused the "urban crisis," and what might they do with the work now that it has been written? In order to answer this question, we must first—and all too briefly—outline a portrait of society's structure in order to better understand what role Sugrue's work might play. For this I rely on a panoply of voices, including Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Marx, Herbert Marcuse, and Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari; I begin with Marcuse's description of the advanced technological society as a point of entry, a gateway to understanding by way of offering up a model which Marcuse himself based on his observations of the pervasive "democratic unfreedom" present in U.S. society:

Today political power asserts itself through its power over the machine process and over the technical organization of the apparatus. The government of advanced and advancing industrial societies can maintain and secure itself only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting the technical, scientific, and mechanical productivity available . . . this productivity mobilizes society as a whole, above and beyond any particular individual or group interests. . . . The machine [is] the most effective political instrument in any society whose basic organization is that of the machine process.<sup>24</sup>

The United States is best understood as a machine, its various components plugged into that central drive which is the lifeblood of the country: capital. The individual pieces of this machine, playing increasingly segmented and rarefied roles as the object is perfected and upgraded, pushed towards technological perfection, the search for total and uncompromised profit, are the people who make their lives in the shadow of this machine: "the organs of life are the working machine."<sup>25</sup> Each has a role to play in this machinic production—even in new and more hidden

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<sup>24</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.

<sup>25</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 8.



productions which have become called “consumptions,” a second operation which converts the excess products of the machine back into dollars that can be processed again and again. On and on in a series of infinite processes which all, each and every one, in some way return to that goal: the accumulation of capital.<sup>26</sup>

Each of us is a tool, a component in this vast and globalizing drive, components unwittingly dedicated to the production of the machine and its central drive. “Everywhere, *it* is machines—real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections.”<sup>27</sup> What produces the visible movements of the machine, the macroscopic drive which can be seen playing out daily in the stock markets and trading rooms of the world, is precisely these linkages between each of us as portions of the machine, components—each with their function to play: “we are all handymen: each with his little machines,”<sup>28</sup> cleaning-up the margins, reducing unnecessary waste, streamlining and parsing out the processes of each of our various productions so that the reservoirs of capital which the machine feeds upon might be further swollen. To aid in this process of repair and improvement, numerous other components and aids, “a whole army of technicians,” are brought in.<sup>29</sup> This painful discipline, which is enacted upon our couplings and linkages each day, which reworks the system and how it must operate on the land (best demonstrated by the reduction of excess workers “on the line” in automotive facilities, and thus the loss of crucial sources of wages for thousands of workers), is rationalized away—the worker

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<sup>26</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xii–xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 11.

is told to hate some unknown enemy, not the system which is in fact creating the discipline.<sup>30</sup>

### The technicians

Sing the praises that the law needs: they reassure it that the body and pain are not the ultimate objects of its punitive action. . . . A utopia of judicial reticence: take away life, but prevent the patient from feeling it; deprive the prisoner of all rights, but do not inflict pain; impose penalties free of all pain.<sup>31</sup>

And so the margins are brought back into the fold of the machine, misbehaving linkages and connections are made tighter, more rigid; we are told that their improvement is ultimately in our best interest.

The reincorporation of deficient or delinquent components further enhances the machine's operation, preventing the fracturing away of the unhappy few who feel the weight of this oppression in their very bones, the few who might actually be able to call into question the very interworking of the machine which they have been excluded from.

What does the technician look like? Who is a technician in today's society and what productions are the apart of in order to realign and correct the system? The answer is undoubtedly multiple, as each of us bound up in the system of global capital (a massive corpus) might all be called technicians of a sort; our very gaze influences the operations of others, organizes a disciplinary boundary, an implicit border which reigns in the individual and draws a line beyond which they cannot step lest they incur silent discipline and marginalization—"the whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable."<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, we might now return to the question with which we began: what is the role of Sugrue's work in the correction of this machine? We can, if the above is true, understand Sugrue as but another technician in the

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<sup>30</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 127–35; Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 179; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1992).



machine, an individual whose knowledge is implicitly understood as a fundamental advantage to the coordinators of the machine and its processes because it has instrumental potential: his lived experience gives him access to spaces and people which the machine wishes to exert control over, it gives him a drive to understand what happened in Detroit so that we might all know better how to respond to such places. And so he is given a place of prominence, his work is heralded as an important step towards understanding; his concept-city—a report which, as we have shown, is divorced from the city in fact—offers up possible gaps to fill in, shows us which relationships are dysfunctional, which components must be reconsidered and reincorporated if the city of Detroit is to be returned to the system of capital as a productive body. Sugrue is, in this sense, a participant in the system of control. By showing where it has broken down *and how*, he has contributed to the body of knowledge which is necessary for the maintenance of the machine of capital; what's more, his contribution might operate in such a way that he in fact makes the system more resolute. Minute tinkering though it may be, Sugrue's diagnostic is generalizable in a way that might tighten up so many hidden and unspoken linkages, strengthening the system as a whole. Untold power is held in those minute but manifold shifts, it is the fine-tuning of a near-perfect system of control.

Through these shifts, the practices of unfreedom which serve to mask the interworking of this machine might be deployed more broadly as they are remapped by Sugrue's words. His memory of the loss of his father's childhood home, a trauma he experienced in a deeply personal and profound way, is but another method for extracting the unspoken power of the "hollow places in which a past sleeps, as in the everyday acts of walking, eating, going to bed, in which ancient revolutions slumber."<sup>33</sup> To the machine of capital, this memory is but another tool of

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<sup>33</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.



power; through Sugrue, it capitalizes on its own contradictions. It was the contradiction of Sugrue's shock—shock at the destruction of his family's homes which still stood in his memory, a memory tinged with the recall of abundance, the auspices of automotive Detroit—which produced a document of order and control: contradiction precipitated a reaction, produced “a guide to the contested terrain of the postwar city, an examination of the unresolved dilemmas of . . . deindustrialization.”<sup>34</sup> Our own memories are not immune from the system of capital or its mechanisms of control.

What do we see being done to the city of Detroit today? Has Sugrue's report even made a difference? We see it in the pages of his own book, one he has revisited over years as it has been published and republished: “Detroit [has] hopped onto another downtown redevelopment bandwagon. . . . The city and state helped finance new stadiums. . . . The city, with substantial private support, spent lavishly to beautify the downtown for the 2006 Super Bowl”; other areas of the city were given a face-lift; “community based development organizations leveraged nonprofit and for-profit funds to revitalize commercial corridors. And to attract investment, particularly in downtown, business improvement districts began providing extra services.” Sugrue concludes that “the payoff is clear: new sidewalks, an outdoor café, music venue, and a popular wintertime ice rink.”<sup>35</sup>

Tooling up, refining the system, reorganizing the margins. Capital moves swiftly.

News reports echo the words of Sugrue: “as Detroit's downtown revitalization drew worldwide attention, a few billboards went up downtown. Downtown Detroit was suddenly a

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<sup>34</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Sugrue, xxiv–xxv.

place to make deals.”<sup>36</sup> Advertisements proliferate: “It’s an amazing time to visit Detroit. Infused with a renewed energy and vitality, The D has been transformed.”<sup>37</sup> It seems that the work Sugrue produced, showing us the exact shortcomings of the system and implicitly suggesting how they might be repaired, was in some unknown and unforeseeable way responsible for this revitalization, a revitalization which has simply brought back the systems of labor extraction, which has instituted a new pacification of the masses through the promise of wages again and again. This “new” Detroit—which is in fact not new in the slightest, nothing more than a repackaging, a rebranding of the old city and its systems of control in a contemporary, more trendy and palatable way—still creates divisions and boundaries as it pushes out the impoverished citizens of the inner city once again, as it panders to whiteness, as it enfranchises the capitalists to rewrite the fabric of the city in their name. This renewal is not a rebirth, or even a cure for the sickness that brought Detroit to its knees—it is merely a repurposing. The corpse of Detroit has been found to retain certain vital nutrients, tempting to the capitalist and their vampiric tendencies: there is still labor here to be exploited, still more land to sprawl out upon, still other means of production to seize and control.<sup>38</sup> The rot has not yet run its course.

If Sugrue had not written *Origins*, would the story be different? It seems unlikely; it appears to be too large of a claim to say that Sugrue was the fulcrum upon which the city of Detroit was leveraged back into the fold of capitalist productivity. Nevertheless, in some miniscule way, it did make a difference: it is precisely through being tiny and miniscule that the system of control hides itself; the decay is only subterranean because its operational strategies

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<sup>36</sup> Ashley Catherine Woods, “Signs Point to a Billboard Comeback Downtown,” *Crain’s Detroit Business*, April 1, 2018, sec. Real Estate.

<sup>37</sup> “Detroit. It’s GO Time.,” News, Chicago Magazine, 2018, <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/Promotion/Visit-Detroit-2018/>.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1: 163, 175, 195.



are hidden within the fabric of everyday life, “supported by these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, by all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical.”<sup>39</sup> Sugrue supplied but one of those tiny motors which helps to inch the machine forward; and if he had not written the work, some other person would have written another similar work, or a body of other works would have been aggregated together to fill in the same gaps which he poured himself into. His experience, standing there on the corner of his lost ancestral home, surely cannot be singular. Countless others have stood where Sugrue has stood, they see the explicit contradictions of the city emerge into their life, written as a hard line of bricks in a meadow full of garbage. Others would have been compelled to ask why, to write, even in part, about the origins of the urban crisis which Sugrue has examined; it was only a matter of time and force.

And what of these children playing basketball? Are we to believe that they do not see the same city which Sugrue, from his place on high, sees? Is it the same Detroit, the one painted in the pages of Sugrue’s book? It is not. It is *their* Detroit, one which they paint with the swish of their ball through the chains of that makeshift board. Theirs is a makeshift Detroit, articulated in walks and movements across the boundaries which Sugrue only documents—he himself followed his parents to the suburbs outside of Detroit before the age of ten, long before the city had decayed to that point he found it in that day when he saw those children; in his adult life, he has not lived in the city he writes about, but that memory of abundance remains with him. Do these children know the things that Sugrue has written in his book? Do they know about the inequality and segregation written into the fabric of their city, do they feel the slow bleeding wound of jobs, do they discern the absence of white residents from their inner-city, do they

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<sup>39</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 222.



detect the slow drip of the emptying city coffers, do they experience the rise of violence and poverty in the heart of their city? Absolutely. What's more, they know it in ways that cannot be seen in the pages of *Origins*; they know segregation not through the mechanism of charts or maps, but through their walks to and from school, they feel it in the push of their mothers' hand into their back "*not down that way*," they understand it in a personal and fundamental way: I don't belong there. They understand the loss of jobs in their parents' struggle to find work, they see it in the cigarettes that pile high at the end of the night, the empty liquor bottles that form the vehicle of escape for so many, in their flight from home to home as the rents keep proving to be too high for them. They understand that their city is Black, that the white population only comes in to work in the day, that it is their cars—shiny and new—which fill the on-ramps of the interstate that cuts through their city, the ramps they must walk by as they return from the school that they attend mainly for food. They see the evidence of the impoverishment of the city in the cracking of their sidewalks, in the failure of their water systems, in the lack of lighting that renders the city at night into a dark space, a whistling and violent meadow. They are the victims of violence on a daily basis. They are the nameless bodies which appear on the banks of the Detroit River or are found in the ruins of burned out houses. They are the casualties of a silent and hidden war which is the underside of the machine that is the United States' central imperative: capital. There is nothing in Sugrue's conclusions that cannot be felt on the ground, known in an embodied way. Sugrue's account is not written for that child on the corner. It is written in part for himself, in part to call attention to the plight of the city, in part as a disciplinary exercise to chart out the reasons for its existence, and in part to discipline the city, remap it in a way that allows for its reincorporation.

Yet Sugrue's text is not worthless, nor should it not have been written: as we have already said *it would have been written anyway*. The machine does not need to rely on people like Sugrue to advance itself. It would have made do with other knowledges or texts, found a way into the embodied knowledge of that child on that street corner in order to know how best to discipline them itself. Indeed, the corpus of disciplinary work that *Origins* belongs to extends far and wide covering a range of cities and methods.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, works like *Origins* remain fundamentally important as an object of study, as a guide for those that do not have the embodied knowledges that the child on that corner has, it allows them a way in—but only a way *in*. If it is to be of any use, the individual must be willing to go farther than the boundaries of the text, to meet the child in person. If one is truly engaged with the city of Detroit then it takes much more than just knowing the pertinent issues, one must be willing to involve themselves on the ground, they must be committed to amplifying and projecting the knowledges of that child outward in a way that does not instrumentalize them—something which Sugrue's text avoids precisely through its exclusion of them altogether. By being on the ground, by seeing the macroscopic issues discussed by Sugrue and his peers play out in life, it is possible to find the points where the practices of control break down and fracture, where individuals find room enough within the system to critique it by exploiting its contradictions for themselves. It is possible to find practices of liberation hidden in the fabric of everyday life.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For works like Sugrue's *Origins*, works which attempt to totalize the city as a concept, refer to Beauregard, *Voices of Decline*; Allen Dieterich-Ward, *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America*, *Politics and Culture in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Kalt and Zalkind, *Urban Problems*; O'Hara, Gary; Paul E. Peterson, ed., *The New Urban Reality* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985); & Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London, UK: Routledge, 1996). For works that attempt to understand the problems on the ground, refer to Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*.



But one must ask, is our observation of these practices detrimental to their existence? Once we have made it known that it is possible to move beyond the systems of capitalism, will these practices be killed off, and will the possibility of freedom die with them? Like the issue we addressed above with Sugrue's work, it seems that the answer is no; the system already has its ways of finding and silencing these practices itself. Through subterfuge and fear, it sets neighbors against neighbors such that when one begins to move beyond the limits of acceptable behavior, they are told upon, returned to the boundaries of control. Even without the probing eye of the scholar, these behaviors are discovered and are later disciplined and punished, legislated against. What might be discovered of these practices in writing them down is already being discovered in actuality through subterranean surveillance, a "network of gazes."<sup>42</sup> What writing is capable of, however, is the ability to ensure that these practices of liberation are not quelled by the gaze, but are instead moved into broader circles of awareness. What the written document can achieve that the body cannot is the transcendence of boundaries; in text, the practices of liberation founded in the city are not stopped at its edges or neighborhoods, but are distributed and passed on to other cities and other practitioners such that they might again be practiced. But we cannot merely document the practice, we cannot be impartial observers; otherwise the practice of liberation might instead be called delinquent or criminal. We cannot write about these practices in a way that allows them to be construed as punishable or criminal activities. We must write them for what they are: the nascent beginnings of possible new social systems, ones not built on oppression and stratification, the hoarding and production of capital, but on true human freedom.

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<sup>42</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 171.



They must be written in order to ensure their survival; yet they must be written in a way that recognizes the radical contingency of these practices, which protects the individuals who are founding this new freedom, which does more to distribute and instruct than it does to merely document and guide. It must also be written in a way that does not codify these practices and thus constrict them to one mode of controlled operation; doing so would kill them, rob them of their ability to morph and change as such practices must. Change is, after all, the insurance built into these systems that allows them to bend to unexpected circumstances; flexibility ensures the freedom of the many over the freedom of the few. It must also be written in a way that does not suffer from the vices of Daedalus that corrupted Icarus, enticed him with the ability to view the world as an object, which drew him so high above the waters of the world that he could but only fall.<sup>43</sup> We must not fall victim to the desire to view the city as a whole, as an object which can be understood and mapped—such a desire is what produced Sugrue’s work, what allowed him to definitively chart out the history of the urban crisis in Detroit in such exactitude and detail that it serves as that definitive diagnostic of failure which may yet reinstate the operations of capital upon the city.<sup>44</sup> To write in the manner of Sugrue and his peers—that is to say, to write from the perspective of Daedalus and his son, to write to understand, to write to fix the city as a whole—prevents the slippage and failures that occur within and between the portions of the machine every day from being seen. Likewise, writing from the Icarian vantage point removes the agency of the people whose very lives make up the city. It robs them of their voices; it tells them how they should view their city—not from the subjective and messy perspectives on the ground, but from the objective and “pure” perspective which can be had only by the few, the misinformed. It

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<sup>43</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 92–93.

<sup>44</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno critique the desire to view things as wholes as the essential project of the Enlightenment (something which still orders our discourse today) in their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, NY: Continuum, 1987).

tells them that their viewpoint is not correct or adequate, yet also tells them that the only path to understanding is to achieve a viewpoint that they are forever excluded from, a viewpoint that they cannot access.

And so we must accept the fragmentary nature of the city. We must accept that we cannot ever truly stand apart from the city and understand it. We cannot fix it in place. When we attempt to do so, we capture only that fleeting moment which existed when we wrote, and not the spirit of the city, that motile and fluid body which is written over daily by new disjunctions. What's more, when we write, the city rejects our characterization of it, the one given to it by the text. It struggles against it as a body without organs.<sup>45</sup> What Deleuze & Guattari's concept here offers us is the knowledge that the body, and collections of bodies that are the city, cannot be codified or solidified as a bounded entity; the body instead flows and shifts. Indeed, it *overflows*, it is fecund, fundamentally characterized by *production* ("a producing/product identity").<sup>46</sup> Further, it is a production which fundamentally rejects organization—though it may appear to be, at one minute, organized in one way (a sensible and definable body) it will, in the next moment, shift into some other kind of organization because "at the very heart of this production, within the very production of this production, the body suffers from being organized in this way, from not having some *other* sort of organization, or *no organization at all*."<sup>47</sup> The desiring-machines that make up the body of the city (not *just* the people who live on the ground there, everything is machinic) are resistant to organization, to the confines of the orderly and controllable grid that we would like them to fall into. The city is produced, is made into an order—and so it has that earlier, more nascent and failed state: the body without organs. Understanding the city *as a body*

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<sup>45</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 9–15.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Emphasis added, Deleuze and Guattari, 7–8.



*without organs* allows us to look beyond the objective and dead eye that fixes the city as a kind of embodied organization, as a whole, as a static and fixed “thing”—a dead and thus decaying body. Rejecting the city as a *kind* of organization allows us instead to look at those dimensions of embodiment *beyond organization*. We can look, as Deleuze & Guattari did, at how the body *becomes* organized, thus understanding the organization which we see in the works of scholars or in the documents that they produce as one moment in the production of the city. Yes, the city is organized, but it is not a rigid and static organization—the city is always *becoming* organized and, it is becoming and unbecoming, its organization is in the process of production, it is a production, it is an anti-production, it is the production of productions. It will never be this way again.

As a body, a collection of machines, we must look not only to understand the drives at the center of the machine (those drives which prepare the ground for the relationships *between* the parts of the machines to occur) but also at the *actual linkages* and *couplings* between part-machines, at their functioning and their breaking down, at their productions and anti-productions. Thus any successful study of the city must engage in a two-fold operation: it must first understand the composition of the body generally, it must engage at some level with the Icarian perspective that gives us the knowledge of the pertinent issues that are playing out in the body below us; second, and complementary to this, it must engage with the city in actuality, at the people who live in these spaces, who are the desiring-machines whose linkages produce the body without organs that is their city. And so it is to this second principle which we must turn as it is the more historically overlooked one.

What are the people on the ground doing? Again the Deleuzo-Guattarian term here is helpful in recontextualizing the object of study: not just people, but desiring-machines. What we



must be concerned with are both the inputs—the social and cultural pressures that precondition the operation of the machine—and the outputs—the productions of capital, of dreams, of walks, of *desires* that each machine and their linkages produce. In particular this first term, “desire,” is one which has been long overlooked. It is too subjective, too messy, too in flux to be objectively understood. Instead of desire, what the individual wants and how they go about getting it, we talk of motivations and goals—objective criteria that can be mapped and charted, included within the existing discourse in a comprehensible way. So it is desire that I now turn to, because, as Deleuze and Guattari warned us,

The political group or collective cannot . . . push aside the problem of desire. Nor can it leave desire in the hands of new experts. It must analyze the function of desire, in *itself* and in the groups in which it is involved. What is the function of desire, [we] ask, if not one of *making connections*? For to be bogged down in arrangements *from which escape is possible* is to be neurotic, seeing an irresolvable crisis where alternatives in fact exist.<sup>48</sup>

Addressing the messiness of the machine, understanding its *desires* allows us to make connections—but is this not something the machine already does? Indeed, it couples individuals itself, “organizes” them in a way conducive to capital production; but these couplings are not healthy ones. They are parasitic upon the individuals themselves, and it is this parasitic nature which produces the rot which we have already described, the rot of contradiction. The couplings which capitalism produces are hierarchical and stratified in a way which *denies* the desires of the desiring-machines, or even institutes false desires within them, desires which place the worker in chains, which are vampiric—sucking the lifeblood of labor from the worker.<sup>49</sup> The connections which are *desired* are rejected under capitalism; and so in addressing desire as an object of study, it is possible to simply find ways to make *better connections*, connections that are non-hierarchal, that are non-parasitic, and that are productive in a way not founded on capital. What

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<sup>48</sup> Emphasis added, Deleuze and Guattari, xxii.

<sup>49</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1: 163, 175, 195.

are the tendencies of the machine's parts? What linkages do they desire and what is it that they desire *from* these linkages? To observe this desire, to understand and *respect* it is an expression of that internal human drive for autonomous and free production—a drive which now pushes us to live for the small bits of time when we are not working, the weekend, the evening, which lets us revel in the material richness of the world and of the body, which pushes us to imagine grandly and think openly, a drive which is the life-force that allows us to build civilizations—allows us to found a new discourse which acknowledges that the macroscopic drives and tendencies we have been observing are not representative of the people in the system: what we see from on high, from the Icarian perspective, is not the true form of human society. What we see from up there is only the form of capitalism and its systems, built up out of the relationships and connections that were necessary to produce the greatest pool of capital possible. Thus it is inevitable that we realize that on the ground these relationships and the drives that they produce in our society do not quite fit, we seem to struggle against them, to overlook and even outright reject them—and so there are disjunctions between these two views, the Icarian and the pedestrian, because they observe different couplings, different linkages. Yet I maintain that these disjunctions can be productive: the tension and conflict between them can reveal to us unifying axes, axes that cut across boundaries and geographies, across race and class and community; axes that simultaneously unify and separate cities and bodies, which allow us *a way in*.

And so we have begun. Now that we have understood the foundation of the discourse—now that we have understood what is at stake, what is to be studied, how it has been studied before, its shortcomings and instrumentality, the nature of our dysfunctional society, and our own neuroses—we can now understand how to push back against this, to found a new discourse, to begin the distribution of these practices of liberation. What is left is to discover these axes that



cut across these cities, to observe the issues and conflicts which unify and separate the people of the rust belt, and to understand how these axes contradict the lived experience on the ground, to find out how these desiring-machines desire and what it is that they desire, to make new couplings and break up old, dysfunctional ones. Now we can begin to string together these experiences, these moments of tension and friction that show us how the machine is breaking down and why; now we can build up, out of the fragments of stories and partial knowledges observed on the ground, a more true and sympathetic understanding of the rust-belt city and its inhabitants. And so we are given that chance to realize that we too are inscribed with these axes, axes which are but the description of the contradictions which our bodies daily fight against, which are embodied in weariness and bickering, practices that attempt to break down the couplings that have been forced upon us. We too are situated bodies, linked up to the systems of capital.

Now we come to realize that we cannot be Icarus. We cannot fly above the city, because we are too much a part of it, we too produce new bodies, new fleeting organizations that will again dissipate and reverberate across the machine. There is no Icarian perspective; we have lied to ourselves because it is easier than accepting that we are in fact trapped inside the labyrinth of Daedalus, that labyrinth which attempts to organize and construct our linkages and couplings, the labyrinth of capital. I am not a view from nowhere. I have lived in rust-belt cities, I was born in one. I am not going out into a field, I am not an objective observer. My parents are colonizers, are exurbanites, are owners of some of the means of productions—and I too am inscribed with contradictions, with desires, with political goals and dreams, with tendencies and patterns; it is not a field that I go out into to find knowledge, it is my home that I must now pilfer from, that I must tear apart, that I must reject; because I know that it has been built on stolen lands, that upon

its timbers lie the stain of the blood of untold slaves who came before us, who were the unhappy tools of a machine which still exists today, which still entraps us in its labyrinth of control. It is not easy to take an ax to one's own home. It is not easy to realize that its location, construction, and existence separate it by mere miles from places of extreme distress, places that have been left to rot because there simply is no economically viable way to use them, to instrumentalize them. But there are no easy tasks. There is no easy way to begin building freedom. There is no easy way to found a new social system. So I accept that I too am bound up in this system, that I am a view from *somewhere*; that perhaps in my walks, in my practices, in my engagements with the world there might be the origin of a radical freedom, and that in my desires and my linkages with other people I might be able to find some answers, might be able to build a house that isn't stained with blood. Let us go out into the world, knowing that we are but one point of view on an infinite spectrum of views, to see what we can see, to hear what we can hear, to feel with our hands the bodies of liberation that have been hidden from us by walls and borders and laws.

There is nothing but potentiality in such a search:

The body without organs is an egg: it is crisscrossed with axes and thresholds, with latitudes and longitudes and geodesic lines, traversed by *gradients* marking the transitions and the becomings, the destinations of the subject developing along these particular vectors. Nothing here is representative; rather, it is all life and lived experience: the actual, lived emotion of having breasts does not resemble breasts, it does not represent them, any more than a predestined zone in the egg resembles the organ that it is going to be stimulated to produce within itself. Nothing but bands of intensity, potentials, thresholds, and gradients. A harrowing, emotionally overwhelming experience, which brings the schizo as close as possible to matter, to a burning, living center of matter: ". . . this emotion, situated outside of the particular point where the mind is searching for it . . . one's entire soul flows into this emotion that makes the mind aware of the terribly disturbing sound of matter, and passes through its white-hot flame."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 19.



Let us be passionate and productive, marked by our histories, burned by the flame of desire such that we approach that real and material possibility: freedom. Desire. Lasting freedom. Truth.

*Part II -*  
***Ways In***



## **Axes & Lenses**

The form of this chapter is two-fold.

First and foremost, this chapter contains narratives and accounts about the actual lived experiences of people that I have met on the ground in rust-belt cities across the Midwest.

Second, within this chapter there is also the filtration and examination of these experiences, both individually and as a whole, to suggest new understandings and potential theoretical frameworks that might better organize the discourse of the rust-belt city. They are lenses, devices to re-examine the narratives that have been recounted from the ground and bring out certain characteristics that might have otherwise remained hidden without them. These lenses are divided into a series of axes, a term so chosen for its ability to simultaneously unify and divide experiences from a disparate collection of geographies, identities, and times into broad and intelligible categories that reveal hidden tendencies suggestive of certain political desires being formulated within the rust belt. These axes show the full inaccuracy of the claim that the rust belt is little more than a historical, political, and economic failure. Along these axes, lines that are like rifts, tectonic in nature, there are other courses being charted out, new possible futures being made that hold great potential for the critique and rejection of capitalism and the oppressive social chains that it institutes. Likewise, along these rifts, each axis shows the radical contingencies of these futures, the true dangers and roadblocks which each social movement must face for it to come to fruition. As each lived experience is examined with the assistance of these cross-cutting, often intersecting axes, is the true scope of capitalism's control over everyday life and the material dangers that it creates within them.

Yet these two things are here presented in reverse; first come the lenses, the tools for critique and alternating perspectives that have been learned from my interactions with these individuals on the ground, then come the lived experiences themselves. This order suggests that it is necessary, in order to find ways into the city, to first understand what kinds of approaches might be made, and what sorts of tectonic energies will one encounter within them; it suggests that if one is to be able to engage with the lived experiences of people as a kind of critical testimony, then one must be prepared to read them as such so that they can find these energies when they emerge, and not after lengthy critical reflection. In order to engage with these lived experiences as the forms of critique that they are—critiques that respond well to both capitalism’s own oppressiveness and the shortcomings of the Icarian perspective assumed from within the study of the city—then there has to be the proper setting made for this kind of engagement to occur; and so this chapter is backwards, as it must be.

What this project seeks through its engagement with the lived experiences of real individuals is not knowledge, not “Truth” with a capital “T” (an aqueous and impossibly platonic thing), but *understanding*—better skills with which to listen and be sensitive to the countless other lives and views that are being formed around us, that is what is sought here. Even so, what emerges from the encounters that have been here written down is not always understandable, is not always easy to imagine as a possible way of living.

It has been said to me that the word “empathy” should be replaced with the word “solidarity”; the first is too often a device that silences, that ends conversation. Empathy claims that it *knows* what the other has been through, that there is no difference between what is going on in someone else’s life and what has gone in the life of the individual that utters it. Empathy suggests a totality of knowledge, an equity between experiences: “I have been there, I have done



that”—and while this seems like a powerful thing, it is also a lie. None of us have been there, nor could ever be there. The other sees the world in a way that we could never see it, lives in the world in a way that we could never live it, and so we can never ever claim to truly *have been there*. The other is always a person treading fresh ground for the first time, no matter how much one desires to see themselves within the other. Empathy is an impossible concept.

Instead, one can claim (and perhaps *should* claim) that they stand in solidarity with the other. To have solidarity with someone (“to be solid with” them as the colloquialism goes) is to suggest that one does not, and cannot know what the other knows, and yet these two beings are here together. Solidarity acknowledges that there is no way to cross the boundary that exists between the self and the other, it is a way to say that one knows that this gulf exists, and while it may be true that comparisons may be drawn between the sides of this barrier, there is no such thing as full equity between them, between experiences. Solidarity is a way to say that despite the differences that exist, each of us is here to stand with the other, to listen, to not claim knowledge about what the other has lived or might have lived. To be solid is to be present with the other in a radical way, a way which ensures mutual understanding: neither party knows this place, it is a new ground that has to be renegotiated, let us negotiate it together. Empathy, on the other hand, is a way to replace the other with yourself.

And so I reiterate that I cannot fully know the rust belt or its inhabitants, and it is likely that I never fully will, because while I am of them, I am not them, not *all* of them. Instead of claiming that what I offer here in this document is total and complete—a kind of knowledge, a set of facts and truths, and objective quantifiable data—here I claim that there is no knowledge here, even though knowledges are present. What this project claims to be about is only a search,

a search for better understanding; and so it must be a fragment, a portion of the story, a story which itself continues to change and evolve as other lives are lived.

This project seeks out other views that contradict those views typically spoken about the rust belt such that the full complexity of these spaces can be made more apparent. What is sought are ways to listen with better ears, to more carefully know the limits of knowledge and reject the idea that any of us can “empathize” with the other. Here instead this project seeks to establish solidarity (to be *solid*) with the people of the rust belt by getting out of its own way; this document is full of voices other than those of the author, the individual who writes this sentence here; these are the voices of some people who make their lives in rust-belt cities, what is written here is merely their interlocutor to you, the vehicle by which their stories might make it to broader audiences.

And so I reiterate that I do not understand the rust belt.

I reiterate that I cannot fully know it.

I reiterate that this document is but one point along an infinite spectrum of possible views, possible ways of framing the situation of the rust-belt city and its inhabitants.

I reiterate that this document is incomplete, a fragment.

To listen to what the city has to say is to allow oneself to become a better listener; it is to listen such that one becomes more sensitive to the pressures and tensions which exist in these places. Even as one knows that I cannot fully know the rust-belt city or its inhabitants, I want to hear them, to frame them, to situate them in a more complicated context, because perhaps this might yet be enough: to better understand the true complexity of life and the systems that it creates.



I do this because I believe that it is impossible to know fully in these contexts, and so it is better to be solid with the people of the rust belt than it is to be empathetic with them; the second makes only an empty promise, a silencing lie: one *cannot* know as the other knows. I know little of what it is like to live in these places, and still I might better listen to what it *might* be like.

It might yet be possible to come to better understanding if only one would stand still, stand *solidly*, and listen.

## Friction

When we talk about resistance, we need to talk about forces *in the plural*, that is about the interaction of forces contending with each other. To talk about 'resistance' is to talk about *opposing forces*.

— Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*

It would be a mistake to discuss the rust-belt city and not begin with the issue of friction.

The experience of these places, in which numerous social bodies are put into situations that force them to behave in ways they did not before, is one fundamentally characterized by friction, by different bodies, spaces, and communities grating up against one another. Yet friction is, by nature, a neutral phenomenon. It is simply a characteristic of conflict, a thing which can be experienced anywhere—but this kind of conflict occurs differently in the rust-belt city, just as it occurs differently in each place that it occurs. There is a greater frequency of it here than there is in other parts of the United States as heat between previously separated bodies is newly generated; heat produced by nature of the cities' very decomposition. Here there is the breakage of couplings and linkages that had once held together various machinic parts in tight bonds, human beings, neighborhoods, buildings, and megastructures—these breakages express themselves as conflagrations such as the ones that broke out in Cincinnati and LA over racially motivated killings made by the police. Friction is a product of rot caused by the peeling away of carefully constructed borders that once instituted hierarchies and social inequalities; they are manifested in walls that turn only at certain corners and not others, or in places like the eight-mile wall that held apart a white community from its Black neighbors; six-feet tall, one-foot thick, concrete, impassable.<sup>51</sup> It is walls like these, most of which are less visibly manifested, that formerly kept apart—or at least suppressed—these possible frictions. Their construction helped keep these communities and bodies productive and quiet, even as people on the oppressed

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<sup>51</sup> Olon Dotson, "Through the Lens of Fourth World Theory" (TEDx Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, October 26, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyWPcUNQz0A>.



side of this boundary realized the presence of it, realized the things that they were not afforded; what the border prevented from them was critique, it showed them their place. Likewise, the border held down the kinds of critical consciousness that might be possible if those who stood on the opposite side of the wall from the oppressed transgressed or removed this wall; if these privileged individuals saw for themselves the real material difference between the sides of the wall, and the oppressed lives that were being lived there, then perhaps there would be a spark, a shock of indignation, the formation of a critical consciousness. Those that live in marginalized positions realize their “place,” and so are kept silent by walls—they are a threat; those that live in positions of power do not always realize the full privilege of their place and think infrequently about the presence of the wall, or not at all. Both sides of the wall are kept silent by it, even as each side experiences the wall differently.

Yet it would be a mistake to say that these borders *prevent* friction. On the contrary, borders can in fact produce frictions. Boundaries and chains inflict wounds upon the body and the consciousness through their constraint, its entrapment. The mind and body chafes against boundaries because they must pass by them, yet are held within them. One is necessarily abraded by restraints like these, and so they are fought against when the pain they inflict becomes too hot, a friction too great to bear. The desire to break down boundaries can be seen playing out in the history of the United States, particularly in the fight for the desegregation of public spaces and institutions during the Civil Rights era. The constrained body desires to slip out of these chains and fall back upon that earlier state of failure, the body without organs. Such a falling-back rejects constraint and order, it painfully dissolves what-once-was in search of new, freer and freeing states—it is a desire, and so it is inherently political; it is a need to remake the couplings

which the body is bound up in and which the body relies upon so that it can find itself in new and more satisfying couplings.

What remains to be shown once such a boundary is transcended, however, is that the differences and hierarchies (flows and linkages) which were produced by the separation of peoples and communities that the wall allowed to come into being have truly been likewise abolished. What remains to be shown is that, in fact, the linkages which the body was engaged/engaging in are now in fact different. New parts may now come into being that did not before (Black bodies, white bodies), but the memory of the wall may still remain in more silent separations, new kinds of segregation which reinstate the wall in less painful, less visible ways.<sup>52</sup>

Friction is the kind of conflict that is produced when boundaries fail. It is a conflict between previously separated parts that had been raised, no *bred*, for fundamentally different purposes, indoctrinated with different beliefs, set apart as different peoples with different practices and drives and desires. Friction, therefore, is nothing more than conflict, the conflict of disparate forces, a conflict between differentiated and hierarchical bodies as they push into and against each other searching for new and more hospitable couplings. Force, the pushing and pulling that occurs between and against these once separate bodies, generates a spark, and thus the opportunity for a response. It is not comfortable to be put into conflict. It is not comfortable to feel heat, to be grated up against in ways that are foreign to your everyday routine (to see Black bodies, to be stared at as a Black body, to line up with Black bodies at white, porcelain, thin, fragile lunch counters; friction is an everyday encounter). Friction prepares the ground for forces to respond to each other by requiring them to take action to resolve the conflict of these

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<sup>52</sup> Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, explores one such manifestation of these hierarchical boundaries after a supposed integration (here in the context of the post-Jim Crow United States) as the boundary which once separated Black bodies from white bodies is reinstated less visibly in the disproportional imprisonment of Black citizens in the U.S. prison system (The New Press, 2012).



forces—opposite forces *demand* a response from each other, even if that response is to do nothing more than bear the heat, to withstand the opposition that newly pushes against you.

What is demanded of the individual subject to this friction, who has become newly aware of the loss of a former boundary? A response, a kind of action—even if that action is to take no action. But what matters *about* the responses which friction demands is not simply the fact *that* action is required—friction only sets up the space for such encounters—what matters is, rather, *what* action gets taken up and for what reasons. Let us re-examine more closely the moment of friction itself: at the instance of heat, the moment of friction, there is nothing more than *force*—the generation of a new ground. In the sliver of time before action, the previously separated bodies have not yet become aware of the full possibility that the loss of the boundary represents and so two possibilities for the resolution of friction yet exist: actions might be taken up that truly and fully abolish the wall, that allow freedom and institute radical changes in the structure of society; actions might also be taken up to restore the wall, to rebuild the boundary and quell the cognitive dissonance which now takes hold (people live like this?!), yet the wall will be forever changed, marked by the knowledge that it can be undone. Yet in the instance of friction itself, no such action has been taken up, everything remains radically contingent, the possibilities of freedom or bondage remain only possible; it is ultimately up to the individuals who respond to the new ground generated friction and what forces they themselves generate that shall determine the future of the border, the boundary, the *chains* and their indelible mark upon the social memory.

In this moment before action, the wall still in fact exists in the minds of those it has affected—I am reminded of an anecdote (perhaps fictional) shared to me by a former mentor about the life of a woman who had lived all her life in East Berlin, just at the edge of the Berlin

Wall. Her walks were daily bounded by this wall, a line that cut down the middle of her street; each day, so they said, she would walk from her apartment just down the street to a bus that ran just a few blocks up. Yet even after the wall came down, even after the possibility of “freedom” from the routine she had established was made possible, she still lived her life as if the wall existed—she walked the same line from south to north, never turning to acknowledge that there was in fact no more boundary. She remained in those paths of circulation that had marked her daily life, the same stores and churches and buses and walls. She lived as if East Berlin were still alive; perhaps she did so out of loyalty, or out of fear, or out of sheer habit, nevertheless she lived as if there was still a wall along that street. And so I reiterate that in the moment before action, the moment when friction occurs, the wall *still exists* as a memory. There are no new forces acting across this former boundary, no new bonds between people, forming so as to cover over the wounds that have been generated by the lines of force created by friction (lines that might become eventually oppositional or sympathetic). In this suspended moment, there has yet to be *resistance*; friction is a neutral encounter, even as it stings.

José Medina understands friction like this, neutrally, as little more than an encounter—one which we can be more or less attuned to based upon the forces which shape us as individuals, forces that define our identities, represent our histories, constitute our beliefs, and establish our affinities with others. It is our attunement to these forces that allows us to understand or even perceive friction. Moreover, these personal forces shape us and determine how we will decide to take up action in response to friction.<sup>53</sup> And so it is our encounter with friction, and how we have been socialized to attune ourselves to it, that then influences how we might take up action, how we resist. Thus the memory of the wall and how it has impressed itself

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<sup>53</sup> José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy 21 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 48–55.



upon us remains salient in determining which future is more likely to come into fruition as a result of the encounter of friction. Action becomes charged, becomes resistance, as it is taken up in response to friction. It is important to understand that the resistance to friction, the resolution of friction through action (which, like friction, is also a force), can be differentiated in kind from friction itself precisely because it is a resolution of it. Resistance, unlike friction, is not neutral; it has a valence.

Resistances can be a good and a bad thing . . . The resistances of your cognitive life keep you grounded. . . . In order to have a real . . . cognitive life, “we need friction,” we need to go “back to the rough ground.” But there are also resistances that function as obstacles, as weights that slow us down or preclude us from following (or even having access to) certain paths.<sup>54</sup>

Our responses to friction, our resistances, can be positive or negative, productive or destructive. Our resistances allow us to assert our existence and our importance—our identity and our central place in human life—yet they also hold us back, they can prevent us from taking certain actions or from even considering other possible forms of action. Resistance is both what brought about the end of the Jim Crow era (a positive valence), and what allowed for racism to become a more subterranean force (a negative valence, change was resisted); resistance is what kept that woman walking a straight line in East Berlin, a resistance that has a more ambiguous valence—it oscillates multiply between possibly “good” and possible “bad” outcomes. Resistance is a force of human creation, an energy, and thus also a valence and a direction. Friction remains neutral and directionless, a force which merely prepares the ground *for* resistance by bringing together conflicting drives and bodies, thus demanding action.

What differentiates the situation of the rust-belt city from that of U.S. society in general is that the sheer number of boundaries which have rotted away is significantly, at times

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<sup>54</sup> Medina, 48.

astronomically, higher than those in other places. There is not just one or a few boundaries suddenly missing, but thousands. And so there are likewise be thousands of resistances taken up in response to these missing boundaries, these new frictions. What might have been constrained in another direction in the past by a different wall may here move freely and openly—it is possible, in the rust-belt city, to remake nearly all of the social couplings which under capital were held in tight and productive bonds, precisely because there are so many broken linkages. In the rust belt, resistances must be multiple and multivalent because of the multitude of missing boundaries, and so, as a result, the number of possible futures which open up to the citizen are likewise multiple. There are not just two possible futures anymore, one of liberation and one of bondage, there never are just two, there are *millions*—futures which were previously not even thinkable suddenly become possible. And while the presence and possibility of these multiple futures helps to impress upon us the great possibility and fecundity which the failure of the rust belt represents, it also communicates an equally great and terrible risk: the contingency of each possible future, which before we remarked was radically dependent upon the enactment of the correct forces, is here even more radically contingent. As the number of possible futures expands, the likelihood that the right resistances will be enacted contracts. As each individual takes up their own unique responses to the frictions of the rust belt and thus projects themselves towards their own unique future, so do others project themselves towards other, possibly confrontational, futures. The certainty and form and structure of that future condition towards which these lines of flight point towards is murky, aqueous and unstable—and this holds great potential for the founding new social systems, but there is nothing constraining what the content of that future social system might be: the future has yet to be written.



This project is only speculative. Things are still up in the air, boundaries still exist, the rust has not yet encroached upon all of our social spaces, there is still escape possible, flight from the fear of choosing a future that is unsure and unstable. So now it is possible to state more definitively, it would be a mistake to discuss the rust-belt city and not begin with the issue of friction because friction is what gives the rust belt its character of resistance, what opens up the possibility of living a life of critique, of demolishing the sick and toxic structures of capital in favor of a society of radical equality.

Friction opens up a way in.

## Case Study, BorgWarner Automotive, Muncie, IN

Indiana's auto industry took another blow . . . as BorgWarner announced plans to lay off 780 people when their union contract expires in 2009. This is the third time this year hundreds of Indiana workers have learned their jobs would soon disappear. . . . The move means the loss of all 780 jobs that average more than \$20 an hour. . . . Still, it was tough to swallow for some workers.

"When you spend 21 years . . . it's kind of a shocker," said one worker.

"It's corporate greed. Did you see the stock price? It went from \$69 to \$79," said another.

- Mary Milz, *BorgWarner Announces Muncie Plant to Close*, WTHR Eyewitness News, February 8, 2007

BorgWarner closed its sprawling transmission and gear production facility in Muncie, Indiana, in 2009, at the moment when the union contract was set to renew.<sup>55</sup> It was the last major industrial facility of its kind in the area, and was home to one of the largest and longest running local branches of the United Auto Workers Union in the nation.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, it was the largest single employer of Muncie residents outside of the local, state-run university there.<sup>57</sup> The closure of this facility put thousands of people out of jobs, all without pensions, and into the way of multiple dangers—dangers of defaulting on mortgages, of losing homes and property, of running out of food, of dropping out of college, real and salient challenges demanding action, a resistance.

This event, the shuttering of BorgWarner, is symptomatic of a larger friction that continues to shape the cities of the rust belt, a ground-shattering force; it was caused by the failure of that wall which normally keeps the worker silent and docile, the wage: it converts them, docile bodies, productive forces for the company and their bottom line. The wage is a wall

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<sup>55</sup> Mary Milz, "BorgWarner Announces Muncie Plant to Close," *WTHR Eyewitness News*, February 8, 2007, <https://www.wthr.com/article/borgwarner-announces-muncie-plant-to-close>; Justin Jones, *Changing Gears: End of an Era*, Digital Video, Documentary (Ball State University, 2010), <http://libx.bsu.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/ChngGrsDoc/id/39/rec/4>.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Changing Gears*.

<sup>57</sup> Jones.



that has been slowly rotting away for decades in the rust belt as facilities like BorgWarner have picked up and left. The loss of the wage generates a force which registers viscerally with the worker; it is felt mentally, physically, politically, and socially in the lives of the people who are engulfed by such closures. As the wall which prevented the worker from rising up and critiquing their employers gradually diminishes, as the promise of wages falters, frictions begin to manifest. In Muncie, there were protests and strikes, even local governmental interventions—there *had* to be a response, people's very lives hung in the balance.<sup>58</sup> The closure of factories like BorgWarner reshape the cities they inhabit, they move populations, cause unions to disband, hollow out communities, and leave cities like Muncie to rot under the weight of lost tax dollars.

This force is so great that, today, there are two Muncies. One exists “south of the tracks,” in the shadow of industrial ruins, a city characterized by poverty and decay, by a sprawling food desert, by closed schools and stores, by buildings which fall in on themselves or ignite mysteriously. The second Muncie sits comfortably tucked just to the north around Ball State University, now the largest employer in the city. This second city is totally different, it is characterized by a growing culinary and arts “scene,” by boutique grocers and numerous car dealerships, by “historic neighborhoods” full of neatly kept homes; it is a city that manages to maintain the border (that chain of the wage) which, just to the south, dissolved, resulting in the protests of thousands, and the flight of many more.

What happened? How could such a friction produce from one city two fundamentally different cities whose lives could not be more different, cities that sit side by side? In fact, there have always been two cities here, as the Lynd's marked out in their study of the town, cities marked and even united by the border which the train-tracks provided; a city of workers and a

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<sup>58</sup> Jones.

city of the business class.<sup>59</sup> What kept these two bodies interwoven, appearing as a united front, was merely the boundary provided by the wage. The southern half of the city depended on the north for their existence and sustenance, thus they quietly coexisted as docile neighbors. So after the chain of the wage was dissolved, these two cities were merely untethered from each other—no longer dependent bodies, they liquidated the false connections that had been made between them and allowed room for other possible orders to come into being. The northern city closed itself off, the southern city began its descent into decay.

Further still, it is important to remember that this separation marked by the closure of BorgWarner is part of a longer history. This factory was merely the *last* large-scale industrial employer to close in Muncie; it was preceded by numerous other closures, including a large Chevrolet plant, and Indiana Wire and Steel (the latter of which was an EPA Superfund site from its initial reporting in 1983 until 2001).<sup>60</sup> The fissure which we see today reflects the broader history that is shared by many other municipalities in the region and across the United States. This is not a localized condition.

As to what happened at BorgWarner itself, it seems as if the answer is complicated, perhaps multiple: there was a case of anti-union sentiment, there was the threat of the loss of the wage, there were long-standing racial tensions, there were class divides. The company, over time, became tired of the demands of the union, who just before the announcement of the 2009 closure had begun to demand raises, more generous pensions, more benefits, etc.<sup>61</sup> BorgWarner

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<sup>59</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1929).

<sup>60</sup> EPA Superfund, "TRI Report for Indiana Steel & Wire Acquisitions Co. Ltd.," Environmental Protections Agency, n.d., [https://iaspub.epa.gov/triexplorer/release\\_fac\\_profile?TRI=47303NDNST2200E&year=2000&trilib=TRIQ1&FLD=&FLD=RE\\_TOLBY&FLD=RE\\_TOLBY&OFFDISPD=&OTHDISP=&ONDISPD=&OTHOFFD=](https://iaspub.epa.gov/triexplorer/release_fac_profile?TRI=47303NDNST2200E&year=2000&trilib=TRIQ1&FLD=&FLD=RE_TOLBY&FLD=RE_TOLBY&OFFDISPD=&OTHDISP=&ONDISPD=&OTHOFFD=); Jones, *Changing Gears*.

<sup>61</sup> Jones, *Changing Gears*.



employees were, at the time, some of the most well-paid industrial workers in the region, and so the corporation, noting this, resisted the union's demands and instead put forth the notice of closure.<sup>62</sup> This gesture seemed to be made directly in response to the need to maintain the boundary which restrained the worker and ensured tight profit margins: the wage. The corporation reaffirmed that the worker had an "appropriate" place in the corporate hierarchy; they reminded them that they depended on the business to supply them with their comfortable living. BorgWarner restrained the worker. The announcement of the closure was another means to refuse the contractual renegotiation which the union sought. In response, there was a strike.<sup>63</sup>

The tensions which had existed between the union and the corporation for some time were enflamed. The union rightly saw the maneuvers of the corporation as an attempt to undercut the mutual agreement that they had entered into; it was a direct attack on their livelihoods. Resistance seemed to be the next, and most necessary step. And the union's resistance did in fact solicit a response: after a long strike and a short period of negotiation, the UAW managed to secure their promised pensions and a settlement of forty-three million dollars to provide for their unemployment.<sup>64</sup> The union stood united as a single body and, for a moment, made the corporation yield, made them recognize their members as human beings deserving of recognition, even as they were unsuccessful in keeping the factory open.

What is interesting about the situation of the closure is not that there was friction (generated by the threat of the loss of wages), nor that there were thus forces generated (the closure itself and the strikes it brought about), but that the responses undertaken by the people affected by this force were suggestive of two possible futures. The first future suggested

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<sup>62</sup> Jones.

<sup>63</sup> Jones.

<sup>64</sup> Jones.

unification, an affirmation that there is in fact no hierarchical division between union and corporation, that the threat of the loss of wages is not enough to keep me silent and docile. The second future suggested a future of division, a denial of the worker and their worth, a muzzling of the union's protest in favor of an acceptance of the worker's supposed "place" under capital, a fission between the union members as they separated out in order to survive. As the course of actions progressed from the strike, there was an oscillation between these two possible and contradictory futures; at times it seemed as if both futures were equally possible, and it was only after enough forces had been resolved together that the line of flight initiated by the announcement of the closure solidified into the future which is now history.

Today the factory still sits in a half-demolished state, a reminder. It stretches for a full half mile, gaping teeth bared at the gray-blue sky.

Like the building, the union also collapsed, possibly from its own internal divisions. The union was a diverse body made up of members of different races and genders and faiths; while they were united in class, other divisions were maintained between them. And so as the bonds between the members of the union became tighter and more resolute, these identities began to grate up against each other, the manufactured divisions which were supposed to exist between them were being challenged, torn down; these new, more silent and hidden frictions, began to emerge and demand other resistances.

The president of the UAW Chapter was a Black man in a predominantly white facility. This was, itself, already the source of some resistances among the employees. After the closure of the factory, the president found messages scrawled into the shelves of his office in black permanent marker: "the KKK lives."<sup>65</sup> . During the post-strike negotiations, some members of

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<sup>65</sup> Jones.



the union and its leadership began to accuse the union president of intransigence and bullishness over the settlement which the company offered them. The former president, however, speaks in *Changing Gears* of his attempt to ensure that the forty-three million would be divided fairly; he wanted to fight to ensure that each and every last member of that union had their deserved pensions and compensations.<sup>66</sup> What united the workers on one front was constrained by this adjacent and more hidden boundary—racial prejudice. Total resistance and critique was not possible because the identities and socialized tendencies of the workers themselves generated new frictions—they could not bring themselves to trust the Black man who led them.

As these frictions began to fracture the union, the initial character of the resistance began to change. The Black president became another vector of force added to this fracturing, a fissure which drove apart the union along racially constructed lines that had long been inscribed into the workers by virtue of their very breeding by the machines of capital that held them in its grasp. As this fracture occurred—as the workers came to understand that the bargaining chips which they thought they had had in their pockets were becoming less meaningful, that their initial solidarity was dissolving, that the company was indeed going to close, that there were other and cheaper methods and workers out there whom the company could and would exploit—the first possible trajectory stalled, and, with it, the generative, critical force it promised likewise halted. What had at first been unification slowly transformed into fission. A destructive force emerged, a negative valence. This slowing of the vector that might have given the union a powerful hold over the company kept the union in talks among themselves longer than anticipated, and when the president returned with the UAW's conditional acceptance of the multi-million dollar settlement four days later, the company accused them of “not responding in a timely manner.”

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<sup>66</sup> Jones.

BorgWarner pulled every single penny of that forty-three million dollars from the table and took away the pension money, money that is cumulatively worth barely .3% of the total value of the company today.<sup>67</sup>

The company quietly capitalized upon the divisions which had been bred into the people who worked for them. They used the fissure of race to break apart the workers into factions and to change the valence of the resistance, perhaps they were even the ones to scrawl the note about the KKK. With this tool they left the union without money, without pensions; perhaps they never intended on even giving these things out in the first place. Even further, they took away the critical capacity of the people themselves; they turned them into mute machines who complied with the wishes of the machine precisely because it gave them a paycheck—even if only for a little while.

BorgWarner's closure rippled out more broadly than just these 780 people. It affected the very viability of the southern half of Muncie as a livable community. The closure of Warner Gear also cut off a valuable source of some of the most accessible and well-paying jobs in Muncie. Before its closure, one only had to have a high school diploma to earn a wage that could ensure a comfortable life.<sup>68</sup>

The closure of BorgWarner also caused a population decrease. In the face of unemployment and possible economic ruin, new resistances had to emerge among the people who called south Muncie home. Some workers resisted the force of the closure by finding their way into other fields and jobs. Others packed themselves and their families up to seek out jobs in other industrial towns that would soon be shuttered themselves. Others transferred to smaller BorgWarner facilities that the company maintained in the U.S. Still others were simply lost to

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<sup>67</sup> "BorgWarner Enterprise Value," Y-Charts, n.d., [https://ycharts.com/companies/BWA/enterprise\\_value](https://ycharts.com/companies/BWA/enterprise_value).

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *Changing Gears*.



time, we do not know what became of them.<sup>69</sup> There was a kind of unspoken knowledge shared between these ex-workers, a nod among friends, a turned back, a stiff gait, a hand in one's pocket: there is no more union, something must be done, where is my next paycheck coming from?

Today, BorgWarner remains a Fortune 500 company, its stock has reached new highs (the closure of many of its unionized facilities even helped it gain trading value); it is a thriving and productive body which has found other workers to exploit; capital always finds a way.<sup>70</sup> Unlike BorgWarner, Muncie is not doing all right—it is not even okay; it is part of that red mark, a wound, a gash, a fount of blood which now lies exhausted upon the land: the rust belt. Yet the memory of industrial prosperity still haunts the community; the former mayor of Muncie, who appears in the documentary *Changing Gears*, describes her frustrated attempts to convince other industrial manufacturers to return to the city.<sup>71</sup> She says that they won't even consider it, Muncie is in a no-build zone—north of the I-70 corridor, it is thought to be too much a part of unionized territory; industry remains terrified of the critical capacity of the union, of the critical capacity which emerges when the restraint that the wage promises is not enough to hold back the worker anymore.<sup>72</sup>

Today, there is still a hole in the fabric of Muncie that stretches for over half a mile. Today, there are still holes in the fabric of the city that mark the spots where these workers once lived; still other holes where they once dined; still others in the places they once went to church on Sunday; still others in those places these hundreds of workers once spread their wages out amongst the others who lived in community with them. Muncie has been decimated by the loss

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<sup>69</sup> Jones.

<sup>70</sup> Milz, "BorgWarner Announces Muncie Plant to Close."

<sup>71</sup> Jones, *Changing Gears*.

<sup>72</sup> Jones.

of these workers, and the workers from other such industrial plants—it was a city once characterized by the large-scale production of glass and steel and automotive parts, but no more. The resistances which emerged from the history of industrial closure, culminating with BorgWarner, kept Muncie as a whole, and southern Muncie in particular, from a possible future of solidarity and unification; their fracturing along lines formed by the social construction of race created an obstacle to critique.

Yet we cannot say that the workers did not resist or did not do enough to resist; we cannot rob them of that human agency. They did indeed resist the moment of friction in that they withstood it. They organized themselves, they remained standing. They still live today, even as they have been fractured as a community.

And is that not enough? Can we look only at the destructive resistance and call the entire venture a failure because it did not create a substantive shift away from the form of capitalist society? Can we *blame* the workers of BorgWarner for not resisting the friction in another way? I do not think so. The nascent origins of more productive resistances were shown to be possible, and here alone there might be hope. And further still, the workers which here resisted did so while remaining tools of capitalism and, if for even only a moment, they dared to resist this role—they stood up to the machines which sought to oppress them—then this resistance can only be called a success. Remember that the machines of capital are expansive and multiple, that the chances of the resistance of any worker against this machine alone are miniscule, and that the chances of collective resistance are even more minute. Had capital not sown the seeds of the UAW's own failure at BorgWarner by inscribing their minds and their bodies with other lines of tension, the story might have been different. The story might have been transformative.



Medina focuses on epistemology precisely because he wants to know how we can be good knowers and how certain people's knowing can be discounted by other knowers. The worker, particularly the "uneducated" industrial worker, is one such kind of knower who is vulnerable to the kinds of epistemic injustice that Medina describes. They are "only" workers, many of whom may or may not have even completed high school, and all come from vulnerable socioeconomic classes. Yet they are knowers: they have a distinct and embodied kind of knowledge which manifested itself quite clearly in the case we have examined—they resisted at the right moments, with the right methods, and in the right ways such that they got a multi-billion dollar company to sit down and *negotiate with them*. This is a resistance and a lived sort of knowledge that truly cannot be downplayed. Even when the resistances undertaken by the UAW members began to fracture along lines that had been inscribed into them, Medina's own words remind us that it becomes actually impossible to *blame* the worker for not "doing better:"

In situations of radical oppression and systematic epistemic injustice, it is very hard for everybody to live up to their epistemic responsibilities. Some would argue that it becomes virtually impossible and, therefore, "responsibility" in its standard sense disappears and assignments of blame should be suspended.<sup>73</sup>

The industrial worker is one such "radically oppressed" individual in that their only purpose, and their only source of life sustenance, is the sale of their time to the capitalist in exchange for a wage; they physically and contractually hand over their very body for the use of another in such a way that they are transmuted in the eyes of this other from the status and place deserving of a human being into ones typically reserved for mere tools. And the worker must accept this place in order to ensure that their life can be made possible; the kinds of resistances which the former industrial employee is accustomed to, the frictions which they are forced to endure every day, the resistances which they *know*, serve to quiet and prevent the kinds of

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<sup>73</sup> Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*, 119.

critical resistance which we might desire from the BorgWarner case; before these workers had encountered the friction constituted by the loss of that boundary formed by the wage, their lives were exceedingly stable and routine; their knowledge of resistance was formed primarily by bearing the heat which frictions produced, the worker learns to accept “their place” within the economy and their epistemic devaluation by the capitalist—and so the union workers from BorgWarner learned to find and lead lives beyond the factory that were largely frictionless, lives that glided easily between the members of the community they resided with, that fit comfortably into the houses of their neighborhood, that slid pleasingly into the safe capsule of the automobile which skips over the ground, avoiding the boundaries of other possible frictions (“less fortunate” communities, separated by boundaries which prevent friction, which might provide the conditions for other kinds of resistance.) The unionized worker does not seek out and engage in resistances in the ways that might lead to critique and liberation because they already are subjected to other frictions that, in many ways, dehumanize and demoralize them as individuals. And so when they run up against other boundaries that mark the location of other communities they are separated from, they accept these as a condition of life and they hold themselves as bodies apart in order to ensure their productivity within the workplace so that they do not feel the sting of that resistance which they must daily engage in—the resistance which ensures they are not fired, that they bring home enough wage to keep themselves alive and afloat—more than they already do.

Marcuse describes this kind of uncritical living which the worker must subject themselves to (a result of their confinement and oppression under capitalism) as “one-dimensional.” Compared with the hard way of life (the “rough ground”) represented by critique, the one-dimensional life is “a good way of life . . . and as a good way of life, it militates against



qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of *one dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that . . . transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe.”<sup>74</sup>

The knowledge and experience of everyday life which the industrial worker is constrained to is constructed in such a way that when a moment of friction might occur, they avoid confrontation with it; at work, they accept their instrumentalization and alienation as a condition of their wage-earning; in their neighborhood, they accept the separation of Black, white, and brown bodies as a natural kind of separation, a thing which they must not be concerned with—I must pull myself up “by my bootstraps” as they say, and they must do the same, right? So if they do not. . . Because of this construction of the world in an uncritical, flat, one-dimensional way, the unionized worker from BorgWarner (who was still capable of a resistance which, at other times, might seem impossible and self-destructive) might not even consider kinds of resistance that could be socially liberating and transformative, that might go beyond merely restoring the smoothness of their one dimensional existence, *precisely because* they still have the means to return to the “good life,” the uncritical life, the one-dimensional life. They have the means and the skills and the tools to earn wages elsewhere, to reject the rough ground for smoother and less mentally taxing ones; and it is important to remember that they do this because it is the life that they know, because it is how their world has been constrained for them. They are knowers: they know the limits and bounds which capitalism institutes in such intimate ways that they likewise know the maneuvers and bargains and tactics to employ to ensure that these borders do not become opposition, that the system of capital does not swallow them whole. Even when the line of flight which emerged from BorgWarner suggested the

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<sup>74</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12.

transcendence of one-dimensional living which the worker is subjected to, these limits and frictions remained as barbs to them. It was their flesh, pricked and wounded by generations of oppression under the hands of capital, that cried out for other kinds of resistance—ultimately destructive resistances which accelerated the shuttering of their facility, which accepted the wage as the last means of survival.

Why? Why did they do this? Because these workers knew that they could still flee from the friction that they had been unaccustomed to knowing—they had a way out because of their training or their union affiliation, for them there were still other un-fractured grounds to turn to; the tension and force required to prolong the resistance to an organization they had been taught to accept as a benevolent master for so long was greater than the force required to simply leave and seek what they already *know*: a life without friction, a life plied by wages, life with the condition of silence.

Yet as the wound of the rust belt continues to grow and hemorrhage, there are fewer and fewer untouched grounds to run to; frictionless spaces are becoming extinct. Eventually, the kind of smooth living which was still possible for the Muncie members of the UAW might be totally impossible, there are simply too many conflicting forces beginning to emerge—perhaps with it, the one dimensional thought which Marcuse warns us of might likewise be made impossible.

Friction, and the resistances that it allows to emerge, are the great potential of the deterioration of the rust-belt city. As the city falls back upon that state of failure, the body without organs, as it rejects the diseased order of capitalism it likewise breaks down the boundaries that this system instituted. This breakdown brings into contact things that have long been kept apart, and from this new forces are generated, frictions. This friction then fractures the easy ground which each force had previously navigated and, by doing so, demands a response.



The responses which are then taken up by human action are resistances. Resistances, unlike frictions, are not neutral and mute—they have a valence and a directionality that charges them with potential. Further, from these resistances it is possible to outline nascent trajectories, radical possibilities for new forms of society, radical possibilities which (as we have seen) are also radically contingent upon the bodies and communities which enact them, and the forces which then react against them. What is qualitatively and quantitatively different about the frictions which emerge in the rust-belt city is that there are so many broken boundaries, so many fractured grounds, so many disorganized and unarticulated masses which must be navigated anew; and so the resistances which must now be taken up are forced to consider lines of flight, actions and resistances, that are totally new.

The critical possibility which has laid untapped in these cities for generations is best made visible by looking for instances of friction and the resistances which they then inspire. Friction is an axis which cuts across geographies and peoples, yet which also unifies them to a set of common causes. Friction and resistance opens a way for discussion and helps tease out the hidden tensions and lines of force that have been inscribed into our social bodies by our former systems of control, lines that might become oppositional or sympathetic.

It is a way in.

*Epiphenomena*

Now that we have come to better understand the nature of friction, we may now turn our attention to those things that emerge from it: countless other conditions, degrees of difference and divergent responses that reshape the rust-belt city in numerous subterranean ways. Not only do forces and resistances occur in response to frictional encounters, there are also new qualities and potentials that emerge from within friction that help to distinguish these forces and resistances from each other; from the ground created by friction, distinct bodies and tactics emerge within and among places that fundamentally color the experience of them. Frictional epiphenomena. They are things which possess distinct properties, characteristics, and attitudes from friction and thus cannot be classified as another kind of friction. Even so, these new qualities could not have come about without first having been prompted by friction itself, or by the resistances which get taken up in response to it. Like frictions, the epiphenomena which emerge from them are not active, and yet unlike frictions they are not neutral. These emergent qualities contain other energies.

As an object of study, frictional epiphenomena offer other ways of seeing, feeling, or interacting with the world, and as such can become their own unique axes that organize lived experiences and our potential explorations of them through their ability to cut across geographies and bodies and times. They are new lenses with which to examine the city and the lives that are occurring within it. Frictional epiphenomena can become emerald-, rose-, or amber-colored glass that slide over the eyes, allowing one to see compositional qualities, hidden meanings, and subtle effects that were not obviously visible before—understanding these phenomena allows one to see more distinctly those things which that quality creates or depends upon



What is made possible by frictional epiphenomena? Past conditions are remembered, new possibilities are seen, other forms of action are recognized as promising, *zeitgeists* are formed or dissolved, new kinds of communication are developed, and on and so on—epiphenomena can arise out of anything and can form from anyone, and so there are an infinite number of possible categorical groupings, each and every one of which might condition still further resistances, might prompt still further frictions in ways that are dependent on the original friction—beneath it all, this is the heartstring that ties together these emergent properties, that makes possible certain lines of flight: the original friction.

Frictional epiphenomena, like friction, are also *ways in*; what is distinct about them, what is added by them, is not just the positive or negative valence of resistance, but also a *color*, a *flavor*, a distinct modality that helps to distinguish unique types of resistance from each other. As related to resistances, these emergent phenomena are also formed, they are manufactured: human-made. Just as friction is a thing formed by the breaking-down of couplings built between desiring-machines (just as friction is a thing created by the social atrophy made possible by the inequitable structuring of human society under capitalism), so too are epiphenomena things forged by human hands out of the heat that frictions produce.

What is made clearer by understanding that these qualities are human-made is double. First, attention is called to the fact that within the space of the rust belt, nothing is absolute or eternal or platonic. Each of the possible futures, and the actions that must be taken to bring them about, the systems that they propose to institute, the ideas about social living that they take as their foundation, etc., are human-dependent; so the future they depict is likewise human-dependent, it is something that must be affirmed and brought into being. These futures are something that must be defined and constantly redefined through the creation, affirmation, and

solidification of couplings along political lines of desire. Second, the truly radical contingency of this future is made fully apparent. Each epiphenomenal irruption—with all of their promise—is fully dependent on the intervention of the human hand for their formation. So each quality, each axis is also dependent on human action and human affirmation. Thus the potentials for liberation that they hold are radically contingent, because human action is multiple, a thing constantly in flux, an uncertainty, an unknowable variable—and this is both something that gives hope, that opens the possibility for the formation of promising epiphenomena; but it is also something that threatens their very existence.



## Hauntings

"Memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable. Fragments of it come out in legends. . . . "Here, there used to be a bakery." "That's where old lady Dupuis used to live." It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: "you *see*, here there used to be . . .," but it can no longer be seen. Demonstratives indicate the invisible identities of the visible: it is the very definition of a place, in fact, that it is composed by these series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers. "Memories tie us to that place. . . . It's personal, not interesting to anyone else, but after all that's what gives a neighborhood its character." There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in."

· Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

The first frictional epiphenomenon of interest takes as its base memory and its spatialization. Memories are linked viscerally to space; smells recall not only an object, but a location; objects recall scenes, places, and people; textures recall the passing of the body along some place, some other body, some thing.

We stood together with Matt behind the Brandery, an influential business incubator, in an alley lined with gleaming cars; a park sat just adjacent, small and underused. Here Matt recalled not the place that he was standing in, but a past that still lived in those alleys for him. He spoke about how he used to come here for the late-night club, its music spilling out into the alley; on top of that memory he layered the pursuit and flight of Timothy Thomas, a nineteen-year-old Black man who had been racially profiled by the police. He recalled his movements, traced out his journey across the city and between buildings; he recalled his motions, pulling his pants up, motions that transfigured Thomas's body into a weapon, motions that led to him being shot repeatedly in this alley by an off-duty police officer who had followed in pursuit.

In the retelling of this story, a thing which mapped itself onto the living space of the city, a critical shift occurred: the city was no longer the same. It became a hybrid space—partially

material, partially memorial—Matt’s memory fundamentally changed the way that the space had to be perceived; it was no longer trivial that the site of this diminutive park was being encroached upon by a parking lot lined with a chain-link fence; it was no longer trivial that a sandwich board with a portrait of Thomas, who had been unjustly gunned down here, had to be chained to a street tree—how phenomenal of a tension there must be for the memory of a man who had been shot and killed in this space to have to be *chained down to an immovable object* in order for it not to be forgotten. This story formed a new space, it brought a political valence into the street. The alley became charged with histories and pasts that could not be unseen, unremembered. Through the words of this story, the past become a double-edged blade: it was something which cut into the present to reveal certain pieces of evidence, certain spaces and markings and structures, as more than just what they appeared to be in front of us—this is not just an alley, but the site of an execution. The past was also something which cut into and across the present. Future actions were suggested, whether that be the eventual breakage of the chain that held that sign to that tree, the neutralization of that charge which it helped bring about, or if it was continued resistance, demonstrations, and charging of the built environment—it was all unclear; what was clear was only that this past demanded further action.

Cities are full of ghosts; places, views, smells, tastes, and stories that are evidence of something or someone that used to be. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in, each city has been lived already, it has developed a past that can be read, a past that lives on in the memory of the people who remain in it still. Hauntings are what allowed Matt to stand in the alley of that business incubator and see it not as this clean space, but to recall it as it was: a seedy club, the site of an execution. Hauntings are what allow Aaron, an anarchist who lived for years in the heart of Flint’s historic Carriage Town caring for five abandoned Victorian homes, to see



not just abandoned houses, houses that others called trash, but *historic* houses, houses still full of life and potential, houses that have something to say and contribute. Hauntings permeate inhabited places, all human-occupied places are haunted.

It seems as if human-built realities wear a thousand coats; skins that slip into and out of view as places, times, and people are drawn up inside of stories and conversations, human exchanges. There is no singular experience of a place, there is no essence which says “this is what here feels like”; rather space is an infinitely diverse experience. Even as there is a certain character of place built up by the history of lived experiences that have occurred there, and by the evidence which these pasts have left behind (buildings, streets, names, stains, bullet holes, graffiti, gaps in the city, etc.), there is also the continued shifting of the city away from that as human beings make it their own—they see the city as only they can, because they have strung it together as a series of events and places and stories that can only be possible from their perspective.

And this is what is so promising about this characteristic of the rust-belt city, its ability to haunt us and to likewise be haunted by us. Hauntings simultaneously connect us to the place that we are in—it is not just a composition of elements, some unknown space made of walls and materials and sensory stimulants, but a *place*, a thing that has been carved out by people, a thing that has lived other lives without us, a place that can be lived in because someone else already has—and it allows us also to project new possibilities, space is a medium to be worked with by the human hand. Space does not just haunt us, we also haunt *it*, we live in space, we add our stories and our patterns of living to it in ways which become integral to the place as it is—not just any house, but *my* house; the scent of eucalyptus or mothballs resting on the walls a memory

of who lived here before, the crack in the sidewalk a memory of the carelessness of the construction company next door.

Here the city becomes a series of what-ifs. *What if* this lot were not just an empty lot, but a park, *what if* this surface were not just a place to sit but also a place to skate; hauntings are not only the memories and stories we have been told about space, they are also tactical tools. We are not passive listeners who take the material of the past and regurgitate it. We can also take advantage of and retell these histories of the past in ways that open up all of the possibilities of all of the compositional elements and sensory modalities of a place. We can change space and the perception of it, we can reengage with it as something that is not dead, but rather something which continues to be possible: the city can yet still be inhabited, can yet still be able to be remade, can yet still be haunted by other possible futures that might become actual.

Michel de Certeau discusses precisely this possibility for hauntings to become a lived tactic in his affirmation of the use of things as another kind of production; “a hidden [production],” that is more subversive because of its ability to hide passively within the systems it operates. It is this usage which is itself *haunting*, something that remakes the objects and spaces and places we inhabit into things that they were not before, things that approach quietly and slowly, things that linger as traces trapped in memory and evidential objects after the practice has been done. Living in space is to consume it, to use it, to thus transmute it, to produce something other than the thing which was consumed—the consumption of media is itself a medium:

Thus a North African living in Paris or Roubaix (France) insinuates *into* the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of “dwelling” (in a house or in a language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He superimposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays



down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an *art of being in between*, he draws unexpected results from his situation.<sup>75</sup>

So the city opens itself up to the citizen as a place that can be used, and thus as something that can be remade as something other than what it is. There is nothing but possibility in the city, because there is nothing but occupation, usage within the city, and this is what makes possible the multiple futures which the axis of frictions before it produces—there is a way of taking up action, of *consuming* the city that produces the desired effect, the right occupation. Living in the city and producing the city are indistinguishable from each other.

Yet there is something characteristically different about the living that is possible in the rust-belt city from the living that is possible in the city that is not so affected by rot and decay: in the rust belt there truly is inertness, endings, a living death. The possibility of hauntings to transform space into a habitable place and to operate as a tactics with which to re-inhabit and manipulate place, is thus diminished. It is first diminished because, simply, there are not as many people here to engage with space—populations have been decimated, as evidenced by the precipitous decline of the population of cities like Detroit and Gary. It is also diminished because there is, somehow, a greater permanence to the ghosts which inhabit the rust belt. The immensity of the loss which the rust belt represents—a loss of millions of jobs, a hollowing out of inner-city neighborhoods, a poisoning of lands and water, and the invention of a vast new, and semi-permanent network of suburban spaces (spaces that have yet to form the ghosts which allow people to truly inhabit them, suburban spaces remain flat and one-dimensional) and economies which sustain the diaspora of white-flight—seems to represent such a daunting past to overcome that the stains of the industrial memory which remain in the rust-belt city feel indelible, permanent. What's more, certain spaces simply cannot be re-inhabited as their toxicity prohibits

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<sup>75</sup> Emphasis added, Certeau, 30.

human habitation; here the ghosts of the past remain in ways that are physically harmful to those living in these places. The possibility of reinventing the city for a new generation, the possibility of haunting space as a tactical re-inhabitation of it, is greatly diminished by these realities.

It is true that there is today a political ethos of “bringing back” the cities of the rust belt (a discourse that does in fact invoke the past as a way to change the future, to make the city habitable once again) with industry and coal mines and jobs, but this invocation of the memory of the rust-belt city as a habitable place is not the same kind of haunting which allows human beings to re-inhabit the city and make it theirs again. Instead, this sort of rhetorical strategy operates as a kind of nostalgia, a coping mechanism with which to see the rust as something that can be scrubbed away, merely a hindrance that might yet still be overcome—the past is indeed remembered in this rhetoric, but it does not itself “haunt” space as a spatial tactic; instead, it invokes the ghosts of the past as a memory with which to cope with the present and its immense losses: there is *not* death here, there is still the possibility of redemption. This kind of memory-based plea is not a haunting, but a lie.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the promise that hauntings offer the city is diminished in the rust-belt city because there has been a qualitative shift in the nature of it; here there is a new element introduced: waste.<sup>76</sup>

Waste is a *displacement* of the end; waste is like the living-dead, it does not die, it continues to exist. It is dumped in heaps, held onto in special repositories, new kinds of spaces are generated precisely to deal with the management and control of waste. The city is not allowed to decay into ruin, it is still a useful tool, an implement of capital. In the industrialized landscapes of capital, waste becomes engaged as a concept that extends far beyond the object:

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<sup>76</sup> Cairns and Jacobs, 39.



entire cities become waste, people become waste, policies and institutions become waste— industrial spaces themselves are likewise seen as a kind of waste, a thing that no one wants, a grotesque eyesore that must be relegated away from the city. For each kind of waste, a corresponding management: scrapping as a means to liquidate the city, policing and jailing as a means to control waste populations and enforce archaic policies, sales and shell companies as a means to deal with unusable industrial sites. The term waste is, in this context, deceiving. Waste is not something that is no longer useful, that is only the public face of trash; waste is a thing that remains useful to capital, but must be somehow removed from the public eye for it to be fully used. Waste populations must be quarantined, located close to waste sites that they might yet become “useful” employees of; perhaps the best waste site is the prison where the refuse of the country can be used on a broad scale for the production of capital. If placed in the right context, waste becomes its own source of social power, the locus of capital and the origin of new couplings that bind bodies across space and time. What is unique about the concept of waste is that it is unlike the death that was given to the city before, its slow descent into ruin; waste is not death, it is merely a suspension of life—walking corpses, living dead.

The industrialized landscape is full of waste, and it therefore operates differently from the city in which hauntings is effective. Hauntings depend on death, and thus the possibility of new birth. Yet the industrial city does not die, it continues to live a bit like the living-dead; it cannot be haunted in the same way as a dead city and so it must be approached with a new and distinct set of tactics. This is not to say that hauntings can no longer be effective in the rust-belt city, but rather that they must take up different understandings about what constitutes death than it did before.

What makes this third, and perhaps most difficult barrier to the deployment of hauntings as a tactic, so enormous is this knowledge, the politics of rust: “‘metal oxidizes, plastic yellows and cracks.’ The technological city of utility and function goes hand in hand with obsolescence. . . ruin restores ‘man to nature’, but *rust confines him* in the middle of his productions as if within a prison, a prison all the more terrible since he is its builder.’”<sup>77</sup>

Unlike death, which prompts remorse and mourning, this new suspended state, the rust of the rust belt made possible by the industrialized landscape, prompts *fear, disgust*. Rust confines us and holds us in, it haunts us in a way that feels oppressive, it shows us our failure for what it is: a decaying and degrading situation that we must confront, that we must either manage by pushing it to the margins as that thing which we see it as (waste), or must run away from in terror. And so the possibility which haunting represents, a way to remember the past as a means to manipulate and consume the city, to transmute it into a thing that might yet still be inhabited, is stalled, held in stasis by fear.

Here, there must be a tactic of rust, a politics of waste: what is hidden by rust, the displacement of life instead of its end, must be made known. Waste is another kind of death, a living death. These altered hauntings, the politics of rust, must address the suspension of life; living-death must be understood as another kind of death, something that must be remembered and challenged and re-engaged with as hauntings did before to remake the city. The hauntings which emerge out of rusted places can no longer appear as they did before, as renewal. Here instead they appear as transgressions, they emerge as conflicts.

The living see waste as just another kind of living, they see prisoners and marginalized communities as living, they see industrial sites and garbage as still living. This denies the

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<sup>77</sup> Emphasis added. Cairns and Jacobs, 39.



possibility of hauntings, and so the rejection of this view, the charge that the rust belt and its inhabitants are another kind of dead feels distinctly different, it feels more like an affront. So it is as transgression, going against the city as it has been put into stasis that hauntings within the context of rust must emerge.

There are conflicts that exist between these two visions. In the waste city, law is held as an arbiter of life; regions are planned for certain kinds of activity, living, industry, waste, and so on. Borders are made, walls that go up between potential bodies of friction, even unlegislated lines are given consideration, lines that receive no acknowledgement on the maps drawn up by the cities; lines that still closely resemble those innumerable red-lined zones hidden on the maps of banks—lines of generationally enforced segregation. The engrained memory of these borders (wounds spoken of on walks, embodied in the footfalls that still stand on this side of the edge, much as the woman from East Berlin did) can only be described as ghosts, hauntings, specters of a history that still shape the city in unspoken ways. These are the kinds of borders which characterize the industrialized landscape, borders which hold bodies in, which transmute the living into waste, which make the city an undead place, a body of capital. And so the politics of rust, the form that hauntings take when engaged in this undead city, are a thousand small transgressions: lots are no longer seen to end at the edge of platted boundaries, homes and ruins are not seen as belonging to anyone. New lines and boundaries, less rigid than before, based on affinities and couplings, are made, formed by patterns of living, consumptions of the city.

I have stood in parking lots and been told about the homes that once stood there, communities moved halfway across the city. I have stood on stages, caving in from rot and decay, moth-eaten curtains punctured by bands of light from the leaking ceiling—stages where Frank Sinatra once stood—now marked by saplings stretching outward toward the light. I have

stood in apartments, ceilings encrusted by stalactites, the evening light glancing across the shattered porcelain of an ancient toilet, and seen impressions of the families that used to live there. I have stood in the shadows of glowering ruins and heard word of the untold tunnels that stretch out below them, extending far to the east and the heart of the city, tunnels full of other histories. The city is full of ghosts, other cities that exist on top of them or beneath them; it is haunted by pasts that are still marked out by the resident or the historian. Painful pasts. Aching pasts. Rusting pasts. It seems that the places that people live are indeed full of spirits.

To the citizen who stands and recounts these pasts, who invokes the ghosts of history to reinstate something that once was for but a moment, the space in front of our eyes is no longer hopeless, is no longer a prison—it is full of potential, the city is traversed by gradients, thresholds of potential that are captured in these stories—I live in a gleaming city, I claim this space as my own because I have lived, it lives on in my mind.

The space that is formed by the epiphenomenon of hauntings is one that sees the past as a foundation for action here in the present. It is a lens that does not see ruin as death, or waste as some still living thing; it sees instead new life in these places, opportunities, it sees great promise in the living dead. Here I am reminded of a man whom I only know through stories told to me by my mentor, Wes Janz. His name is Keith, and last I heard he lived in Flint, Michigan. Nothing has been heard of him since 2006. Keith is a squatter; he makes his life in homes that no one lives in, though it is true that some name exists on the deed, a name that is not his. Often he would live on porches, blankets forming the walls of his home. In his occupation of this left-behind place—a kind of waste product, a home set aside to be used for its scrap, or to be one day resold—he had gained an intimate knowledge of this place, he knew how to move from place to place freely, avoiding arrest and the harassment of a local property management agency. He had



learned, as one student said, to “hunt,” always finding food, clean water, and just enough resources to survive through the winter, to even live just a little bit.<sup>78</sup> Over the years he had amassed a collection of motivational poster, his favorite read “I am me . . . I am okay.”<sup>79</sup> Keith is an individual who understands the potential of places like Flint. He is someone who reads the past, who sees the death hidden just underneath the word “waste” and transgresses the boundaries that capital creates in order to re-inhabit space as a new kind of living *place*. There is something about his presence in these houses, his “squats,” that makes them into homes again—something about the presence of the human being seems to slow the process of decay. He does not regret this life, even as he admits that it is hard; he moves often, as is necessitated by his transgression of the boundaries that are supposed to be instituted in these places to preserve them as living capital. “‘You can get as much as you want out of life. I believe in being positive.’ I didn’t anticipate a pep talk from a squatter. A life lesson.”<sup>80</sup>

Keith represents just one kind of potential that comes out of this axis, a potential for rethinking the terms of property and ownership and material sustenance in ways that do not depend on capital itself. It is a potential that many people like him have developed over the years, an open resource network, shared among members of the “squatter” community. There are even people who have rehabbed their own homes, using only found materials, waste, returning the resource that might have been lost to time and ruin to something habitable once again. Yet they cannot get gas in their home, or running water; they are not owners, even as they have exhibited the trues marks of ownership—commitment to a place and the formation of strong community with others.

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<sup>78</sup> Wes Janz, “This Is Flint, Michigan,” *Places Journal*, February 2011, <https://placesjournal.org/article/this-is-flint-michigan/>.

<sup>79</sup> Janz.

<sup>80</sup> Janz.

The resistances that hauntings shape take on this character, the potential of the past to make room for a brighter future, a future colored by a deep knowledge of what came before us. Keith can tell you about the neighborhoods he lives in, their own histories, the people that still live in them, when they were founded, and so on—just ask. Yet this is one irruption emerging from the pool of memory; there are countless others, each tied to this essential commitment: memory. Space. The unity that exists between the two, and thus the possibilities that both, together or separate, might offer for the formation of better couplings, healthier bodies, bodies not trapped by fear, the confines and corpses of rust.



## Heroism

As we have seen, the rust-belt city is a space full of opportunity and potential; it is a fertile ground that allows for the transgression of so many previously rigid boundaries. The rust belt's decay gives off a scent, a pheromone—perhaps it is the allure of opportunity which seems to attract certain kinds of people out from the fringes of society. They come for many reasons. Some are attracted by the promise of a fresh start. They see the ruined city as a *tabula rasa*, an empty ground from which they can begin again. Others come because they see the ruin as ruin, an open sign, a pain, a cry for help. Some come to the city as missionaries, as social workers, as non-profit employees, as public-interest activists; they see pain as an opportunity to intervene. Still others come as mechanical technicians, brought in by the machine to realign the stalled gears of labor, to rewrite policy, to kick-start development, to “right-size” the city and shed excess debts, sloughing off the detritus of those improper couplings that must now be remade. They are fresh bodies, an infusion of blood (capital is a vampire).<sup>81</sup>

They might best be called heroes; individuals imbued with a purpose, a mission, a desire to act that is sometimes taken up without critical reflection; the hero can be a destructive force, and yet they can also be a productive one. Heroes work to alleviate the symptoms of the machine, a necessary and praiseworthy cause. Many work to do so from inside the machine itself, and so the hero has the potential to use the system against itself and institute new and more subversive couplings that denature the machine as a whole. The uncritical hero, however, risks using the system as it is, extending its grip onto individuals that might have existed outside of its control. The uncritical hero can be another type of Foucauldian technician, just like Sugrue.

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<sup>81</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1:163, 175, 195.

Both potentials exist within the hero.

Both kinds see the rusted city as a sign; they see the loss of boundaries as an opportunity to either break them down further or to rebuild them.

The uncritical hero is the most dangerous kind of actor here in the rust belt; like the unintended consequence that Sugrue's book may have had on Detroit to prevent further resistance and re-regulate the city through the close examination of policy and history, the uncritical hero is mostly a "corrective" force, someone who rebuilds walls and tightens up the linkages of the machine ("disciplinary punishment has the function of reducing gaps. It must therefore be essentially corrective,").<sup>82</sup>

The uncritical hero looks to correct defects in these spaces. They look to clean away rust because decay is a defect; rust is a defect. Even further, the failure to labor as expected, and for long enough, and with satisfactory products, are defects. The uncritical hero is an individual that comes in and sees the rust-belt city as a defective social object, something in need of correction. And so they make their mode of correction something useful to the body; they bring sustenance, education, job-training, housing, or material determination to those who may have lived without them for a time. They bring those things that the body remembers from their time of confinement within the body of capital, and so the people of the rust belt are receptive to it. They remember the comfort of these things. These tools, implements of retraining, that the uncritical hero brings can be silencing, a return to the one-dimensional life.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 179.

<sup>83</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.



What is more, the uncritical hero's blind operation within the confines of capitalism means that they do not see their interventions as corrective; they believe that they are only bringing needed assistance. The things they bring are necessities: food, shelter, job-training, practical skills classes, social networking, things that people need to live "normal" lives—and it is that word right there, *normal*, that is the thing they do not see. The uncritical hero believes that there is a basic level of social existence expected out of every individual living in society—and they are correct, capital expects much out of the individual; capitalism creates a norm by instituting those countless measures of corrective training into everyday life.

And, largely, this corrective training is accepted. We are used to the oedipal triangle of life: daddy, mommy, me; "desiring-production forms a binary-linear system. . . . The series is completely refractory to a transcription that would transform and mold it into a specifically ternary and triangular schema such as Oedipus," and yet "normal" has become this triangular thing, our dependence on another over and above us who allows us to be, a parent, a disciplinarian, a Foucauldian technician.<sup>84</sup> So the uncritical hero is a person who restores the triangularity of life under capital and quells the worry of the mind that has been put into the way of frictions.

The true hero is the one who understands their location relative to the system and the capacity that they have to bring harm to the populations that they serve if they forget that position. This kind of hero is a more complex character. The true hero is critical of the system, and yet works within or beside it; the true hero is hopeful about the possibility of resistance, and yet they offer those things that in other places might be used to bring one-dimensional thinking

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<sup>84</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 14-15.

to the individual; the true hero understands the full agency and critical capacity of the people that they serve and seeks to bring these to their fullest potential. The true hero is a person who sees the pain of the rust belt and intervenes within it not to prevent resistance and critique, but to prevent death, to ease the material pain and hardship of life in these places such that the critical capacity of the rust belt and its inhabitants can be preserved—their death would not be productive in the end, we must work to save them as we can, and this often requires accepting the money that the system offers, this requires risking one's own critical capacity in exchange for a life lived turning the system against itself. The true hero understands that they have a great ability to harm, and chooses to act anyway, keeping this possibility in mind so that they might make a critical difference with their life.

Most actors in the rust belt are neither of these two poles; most exist somewhere in the middle, acting in some places uncritically and in others critically. Most heroes have blind spots because they can come to see their action as somehow right—they *must* be right, many risk their careers, other possible lives, sometimes their life itself to act. This is the danger of taking action in general: seeing one's action as morally right without serious critical reflection on what that means at each and every step.

Even so, the hero is *just* an actor. They do not necessarily limit the possibility offered by the decay of the rust belt; perhaps those that the hero seeks to serve will be able to see the uncritical heroes, to tell them apart from the true ones. There is hope that this might be the case because of what the rust belt is, a “body without organs . . . it intervenes within [the triangular] process as such for the sole purpose of rejecting any attempt to impose on it any sort of



triangulation implying that it was produced by parents.”<sup>85</sup> In the rust belt, where the order of capitalism has been shown to produce putrefying effects, there is the possibility that the individuals most affected by it will feel the body without organs active within them and see the façade of the uncritical hero for what it is: a lie.

“Job-training? For what jobs?”

“If I must hear you preach, then I will take your food and continue to make my way without your god.”

“How could this body have been produced by parents, when by its very nature it is such eloquent witness of its own self-production, of its own engendering of itself? And it is precisely here on this body, right where it is, that the Numen is distributed and disjunctions are established, independent of any sort of projection.”<sup>86</sup>

This possibility, for living life without the hero, or for resisting the uncritical hero, remains.

Nevertheless, the hero is a complex actor, their gaze is something that presents itself everywhere, something which can see the inequities of capital for what they are, and yet still involve itself within mechanisms of control. Some heroes do so because they believe that their intentions are good, and this is enough—so they are caught up in the system’s countless caveats and hidden strings; others know that the system comes with strings, and that these can only be subverted if one is aware of them. Heroes are people who work on every plane of the city, and on every apparent side of the dominant order, they come with many different missions seeking

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<sup>85</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 15.

<sup>86</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 15.

many different things, sometimes seeking nothing at all. The hero can be an opponent to change, and they can be an advocate for it, an accelerator of it.

Heroism develops from friction when an individual sees the origin of that friction as a contemptible thing and thus seeks a resolution of it, either through the rebuilding of the barriers that existed before, or by tearing down yet more barriers. It is a kind of lens that suggests that the only kind of resistance that can be had is active, the hero must do something. Because of this call for action, heroism risks collapsing the complexity and nuance of the ethical situations of the city into a mere dialectic; it risks assuming that there is a universal rightness or wrongness to action without critical examination of the consequences that one leaves in one's wake—I am right, *they* are wrong.

Even so, this is only a risk; heroes can remain discerning, can accept the complexity and nuance of the city and use that to their advantage. The hero is an ambiguous character that can oscillate between these poles or work firmly at one end; the hero can be a powerful ally or an imposing foe.

What remains at the heart of heroism is opposition, the burning desire for action.

Here in the rust belt, there are many things to be opposed to, there are yet more things to act upon.

And this is what makes the hero such a complex, potentially dangerous, potentially radical character; like the rust belt, they too are multiple.



## **Lived Experience**

*Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati, N.D.*

Over-the-Rhine is a community which is today the center of a burgeoning new cultural scene in Cincinnati, Ohio, but it has not always been this way. In fact, up until very recently, Over-the-Rhine has been a community of immigrants. It began as an enclave for German immigrants in the early nineteenth century, separated from the main portion of the city by a thin canal that was a key piece of infrastructure in growing the city as a port of commerce.<sup>87</sup> This canal is what gave the community its name, although people disagree about whether the name was derogatory (a way of affirming the separation of peoples, a way of deriding them, after all they live by a sewage-filled and stinking stream) or if it was unifying (a way to assert that they were German and they were not so far from home, they were “just over the Rhine”). Either way the name stuck, and, as the city grew northward, this community became a central part of the city. Its historic architecture has since become a point of pride and a key piece of re-development efforts. Nevertheless, the racist tendencies which surrounded and produced this district remained distinctly present throughout the turn of the century; in particular, this district—which had, as part of its cultural heritage, over a dozen German breweries—was the pointed subject of prohibition-era legislation and, later, police raiding.<sup>88</sup> It was not until World War II however, a period of high anti-German sentiment, that the historically Germanic neighborhood began to empty of its original inhabitants.<sup>89</sup>

In place of these immigrants came others, particularly from the reconstruction South and later the failing coal mines and agricultural fields of Appalachia. This new population was

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<sup>87</sup> Over-the-Rhine Foundation, “Over-the-Rhine History,” Over-the-Rhine Foundation, n.d., [http://www.otrfoundation.org/OTR\\_History.htm](http://www.otrfoundation.org/OTR_History.htm).

<sup>88</sup> Over-the-Rhine Foundation.

<sup>89</sup> Over-the-Rhine Foundation.



primarily composed of Black workers seeking jobs in the cities then-booming industry; they were working-class people in low-paying jobs.<sup>90</sup> The area began to be characterized as dangerous, as it is still today, as it filled up with tenements by nature of its segregated and vulnerable populations.<sup>91</sup> This trend, for Over-the-Rhine to become the home of the working poor and Black and Brown peoples of Cincinnati, was further fueled by the construction of interstate 70 directly through the Old West End, a historically Black community; the displaced people made their way into the neighboring tenements of Over-the-Rhine and exacerbated racially driven violence in the region during the Civil Rights era.<sup>92</sup>

It is this violence, tension, and physical degradation of Over-the-Rhine's architecture, fueled even more by post World-War II white flight, that led the area to slowly empty out. During the 1970s and '80s, Over-the-Rhine reached the nadir of its abandonment; a hyper-segregated area, the neighborhood became composed primarily of low-income Black individuals—the highest percentage concentration of which was 81% in 1990.<sup>93</sup> 72% of these Black families in Over-the-Rhine at this time were living below the poverty line, a total of 518 households.<sup>94</sup>

What is not said in these statistics is that, because of this hyper-segregation, the key amenities that these residents relied upon were snuffed out. The white flight took with it groceries and laundromats and other such places; and so, in response, this community was forced

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<sup>90</sup> Over-the-Rhine Foundation.

<sup>91</sup> Colin Woodard, "How Cincinnati Salvaged the Nation's Most Dangerous Neighborhood," *Politico Magazine*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/what-works-cincinnati-ohio-over-the-rhine-crime-neighborhood-turnaround-city-urban-revitalization-213969>.

<sup>92</sup> Over-the-Rhine Foundation, "OTR History."

<sup>93</sup> Michael Maloney and Christopher Auffrey, *The Social Areas of Cincinnati: An Analysis of Social Needs, Patterns for Five Census Decades*, 5th ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Michael Maloney and Associates, 2013), 14, <http://socialareasofcincinnati.org/files/FifthEdition/SASBook.pdf>.

<sup>94</sup> Maloney and Auffrey, 40.

to build their own haphazard economy. We can see it in the numerous mom-and-pop stores whose vacant shadows still dot the area, ones like Reginald Stroud's "Anyone's Dream" store—which was forced to close because the owner of the building Stroud rented his storefront, home, and karate studio in agreed to sell the property to 3CDC, a development corporation.<sup>95</sup> These stores filled in the gap that was left behind by abandonment; they comprised a resilient community even as their city continued to be emptied out of people and capital. This is the community that today is filled by boutiques and chic, exclusive restaurants (like the Senate, which serves hot dogs at eleven dollars apiece).<sup>96</sup> Restaurants like this exist today alongside homeless people, holding cardboard signs begging for food.<sup>97</sup>

What happened? How did the city go from being the "most dangerous neighborhood in America" to being the model of non-profit redevelopment?<sup>98</sup> How did, in less than ten years, Over-the-Rhine go from being over 80% Black to a 50/50 split of white and Black residents?<sup>99</sup> It is, perhaps, one of the most radical examples of gentrification in the United States.

It occurred in part because of a private redevelopment corporation called 3CDC who leveraged their private, corporate funding, along with accusations of criminality and "danger" to wage a property campaign against the local residents and their homes and businesses.<sup>100</sup> The Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (or 3CDC) describes itself as a group that is "building life in our inner city."<sup>101</sup> The organization was set up as part of a raft of organizations

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<sup>95</sup> Jarrod Cann and Erick Stoll, *Good White People: A Short Film about Gentrification*, Documentary (Jarrod Cann & Erick Stoll, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdUsZaJ80zI>.

<sup>96</sup> Senate, "Senate Food," Senate Pub, n.d., <http://senatepub.com/food/>.

<sup>97</sup> Cann and Stoll, *Good White People*.

<sup>98</sup> Woodard, "How Cincinnati Salvaged."

<sup>99</sup> Maloney and Auffrey, *Social Areas of Cincinnati*, 14.

<sup>100</sup> Woodard, "How Cincinnati Salvaged."

<sup>101</sup> Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, "3CDC," Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, n.d., <https://www.3cdc.org/>.



that emerged at the recommendation of a commission put together by the city to address rampant depopulation, accusations of structural racism, and crashing city revenues.<sup>102</sup> It says that it is committed to fostering local partnerships and to “strengthening the core assets of downtown by revitalizing and connecting” the downtown area.<sup>103</sup> 3CDC presents a public face of inclusion; it talks openly about its community partners, and it boasts the number of key community projects it has developed—including, perhaps most significantly, the Cincinnati Music Hall and the David & Rebecca Barron Center for Men (an emergency shelter for homeless men that succeeded the former Drop Inn).<sup>104</sup>

On the surface, this corporation appears to be an upstanding community organization committed to local place-making through the creation and preservation of meaningful places which tie together historical heritage and future projects. It plans an absolutely thriving list of community events which help to support local artists and organizations, which in turn helps to bring local business to the area and offer new employment (for instance, it has helped to negotiate the opening of an eight million dollar mixed-use project including a new Kroger grocery store—a company themselves headquartered in Cincinnati—in the Cincinnati downtown, the first non-suburban store that Kroger has built in over nine years), which creates a community feel to support and engage with the population of Cincinnati.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, “About 3CDC,” About 3CDC, n.d., <https://www.3cdc.org/about-3cdc/>.

<sup>103</sup> Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation.

<sup>104</sup> Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, “Music Hall,” Music Hall, n.d., <https://www.3cdc.org/project/music-hall/>; Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, “David & Rebecca Barron Center for Men,” David & Rebecca Barron Center for Men, n.d., <https://www.3cdc.org/project/drop-inn-center-mens-facility/>.

<sup>105</sup> Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, “Events,” Events, n.d., <https://www.3cdc.org/civic-spaces/>; Alexander Coolidge, “Why Kroger Is Moving from OTR to Downtown,” *The Enquirer*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/money/2017/06/08/why-kroger-moving-otr-downtown/370359001/>.

It seems, at first, as if 3CDC is a model non-profit, an advocate committed to the local community and their needs, a group balancing the conflicting pressures of historic preservation and contemporary development. Yet, as is inevitable with any organization that deals with the production and “development” of our built environment, the story is much more complicated than that.

3CDC has partaken in a number of ethically questionable practices to undertake this dramatic makeover of the neighborhood. The development corporation approaches absentee owners in secret and promises them compensation if they would allow their rent-subsidized housing to fall into disrepair and vacancy; they sit on bought properties, allowing criminal activity to leach into them in order to claim that certain spots in Over-the-Rhine are “problem areas,” thus letting the police roust out the last residents in the name of shutting down “drug rings;” 3CDC actively sought for the neighborhood to be designated as a “historic district” so that they could cover over their aggressive acquisitions of property with the false mission of “preservation.” Stories like these abound—and yet they are rarely recorded. Most exist by word of mouth only. 3CDC has publicly denounced claims of gentrification, the former mayor himself claiming that “no one has been displaced” by 3CDC developments.

This is patently false.



*Matt, Cincinnati, 2018; Annette, Cincinnati, 2018*

The Cincinnati Homeless Advocacy Network sits just at the south-eastern edge of Over-the-Rhine, a block away from the downtown business district. Its prominence on the street is highlighted by the coloration of the building itself—the bricks have been painted white and blue, a stark contrast to the orange-red bricks of the surrounding buildings. In a move that upset several prospective buyers of the historic building, the coalition just paid off the building—it is now officially owned by the coalition, and they have no intention of going anywhere.

Their immediate neighbors include three bars, a Pilates studio, a counter-serve artisan taco joint, and several exclusive apartment buildings. Naturally, the covered storefront, picket fence, and steel benches which sit immediately in front of the coalition's building stand out from these more rarefied environments. The building seems to bristle outwards into the street, putting physical boundaries between itself and its fifteen-dollar-a-meal neighbors. The benches especially have been the source of hatred from the local community; they are long enough to sleep on, cemented into the sidewalk with concrete, and are occupied nearly daily by Black men and women who stand out distinctly from the white bar-goers and Pilates students. Much like the district itself, it seems like the coalition building is tensed, ready to explode at the slightest provocation—it all has the feeling of a life or death fight.

The defensiveness of the building made me feel uneasy about entering—I wasn't supposed to be there. I asked a gentleman, smoking a cigarette on the bench outside, if this was the entrance. Even after receiving his affirmation, I admit that I felt tense as I opened the door.

Inside was a linoleum tiled lobby, lit by dim, bluish fluorescents, occupied prominently by two desks and an aisle of seating.

I introduced myself, “Hi, my name is Ben Slightom, Daniel from the Levitt House sent us down here to see if anyone would be willing to talk to me. I’m doing some research—“

But the Black woman at the main reception desk, shaking her head, lips pursed slightly, didn’t need to hear anymore. “You’ll have to come back tomorrow. We close in twenty minutes, we’re getting ready to head home for the day.”

I stared blankly at the desk, the woman’s hands rushing rapidly through a stack of bills, it seemed that that was that. At the same moment, a tall, slim white man in khakis, bright orange tennis shoes, a hoodie, a bulky brown Carhartt, and a tight beanie over Oakley-esque sunglasses came in off the street.

“Actually, maybe he’ll talk to you,” the receptionist began, “Matt, these gentlemen are here to talk to someone,” her tone was short, the exceptional brown hat upon her head flopping slightly, reinforcing the terseness of her voice.

Matt turned, slightly caught off guard. He looked us up and down, head briefly darting to the door as if to escape. He glanced down at his watch, “I guess I’ve got time,” he said in defeat “okay come on back.” He moved me past the desk into a room just off to the side where we filed past rows of mailboxes filled with envelopes, past maps of Cincinnati and old promotional posters. We sat just at the corner of a conference table that clearly used to be someone’s dining room set, the lozenge shaped table—designed to seat twenty to twenty-five dinner-guests—was rotated at thirty degrees, just barely fitting in the small room dimly lit by bluish-green fluorescent tubes. Behind us was a poster commemorating a local man: Buddy Gray.

Matt took off his hat and smoothed his hair. He set aside his coat, revealing a time-worn red hoodie bearing the motto “OHIO VS. THE WORLD.” His face, much like Esper, was faintly



lined with wrinkles, nascent and thin but clear; wisps of gray had begun to appear in his mousy hair, salt-and-pepper stubble shadowed his face. Matt looked, especially at the end of the day, profoundly tired. His bluish-green eyes, however, were fierce and bright betraying an interior vigor and passion that came out in his speech. He seemed to be in his late twenties, his attitude and persona belying the lined face and touches of gray. Much like Esper, his passion for his work built an illusion of agelessness around him.

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you’ve got,” I prompted, curious about his role.

A cynical smile bent the corner of his lips slightly, a smirk emphasizing the laugh-lines at the corner of his eyes. He enjoyed the open-ended question, launching into a rapid-fire twenty-minute history of Over-the-Rhine and its geography, both physical and political. Matt seemed concerned deeply with the theoretical and historical master-strokes of the region—but he skipped any personal narrative. There was a frenetic frustration to his words as Matt related the charged social history of Over-the-Rhine to us, stressing the continued contingency of the displaced populations that call it home, and the increased danger they had in being wiped out due to the swift gentrification of this neighborhood. His comments were full of cynical jabs, constantly calling attention to the contradictions hidden within the overarching narratives.

Now waist-deep in history, Matt paused, his eyes returning from a distant place—“Is any of this what you want? I feel like you won’t remember any of this.”

“It’s not so much what you say, but how you say it,” I returned.

“Alright then,” Matt shrugged, bugging out his eyes, turning up the corner of his mouth again, the comical facial contortions punctuating his speech helped him appear youthful, but also highlighted his apparent cynical mood towards the entire social situation of Cincinnati.

Matt continued on, now delving more deeply into the formation of the coalition itself and its network of community organizations. The entire historical narrative, it seemed, was necessary to lead us to this moment right here—just on the brink of the present. He turned us back to the poster on the wall behind us, the one of Buddy Gray. “Buddy was a hero,” Matt added, his expression for once apparently sincere. Buddy had been a Purdue graduate, but returned here to Cincinnati—his roots. He had been a long-time resident of Over-the-Rhine and became concerned about the condition of the neighborhood as its economic and institutional abandonment worsened in the seventies, eighties, and nineties. His social activism began when he opened his personal apartment to the homeless, allowing anyone to sleep there overnight. Within the first week, so Matt recounted, he had ten people sleeping on his floor any given night—and it kept expanding. He soon was forced to find more space and rented out a store-front as the first iteration of the now famous (perhaps infamous to some) Drop Inn, a homeless shelter designed for overnight housing. Matt painted the man as a political saint, his work in the area and activism through photojournalist surveys of the individuals who were affected by the conditions of Cincinnati seemed to be built on the back of true care and concern for the people in the neighborhood.

But not all people agree about the legacy of Buddy Gray. Others described him as a “poverty pimp” whose intimidation tactics and “in-your-face shouting” worked to funnel depleted city funds into his low-income housing schemes—some of which may have landed in his own pocket. Those who were against Buddy say that he was working to keep Over-the-Rhine



poor by saturating it with rent-subsidized units, buying up unused spaces for homeless shelters and related support networks, then sitting on the rest—vacant unused properties prime for the generation of “more crime.”

Another string of controversy was built on the back of Gray’s successful delaying of the attempts by 3CDC to have Over-the-Rhine listed in the National Register of Historic Places. He blocked committee votes, delayed proceedings with petitions and ballot measures, and managed to pass a three-year embargo on the decision of the council to add the neighborhood to the register. Some claim that his move to prevent the designation of Over-the-Rhine as a historic neighborhood was to prevent “negro-removal” through eventual gentrification—they believed (rightly) that Over-the-Rhine’s addition to the National Register would have been a death knell for the community that Buddy had fought to preserve. Others argue that it was his attempt to further his “empire of poverty” by ensuring the longevity of the organizations that supposedly funneled money into his own accounts. Matt acknowledged this controversial history, but claimed that the vast majority of critique was propaganda stirred up by the institutions and individuals who sought to turn Over-the-Rhine back into a bastion of white culture and money.

Matt continued, describing the continued struggle to house the Drop Inn—it outgrew its storefront and eventually moved into a former warehouse building. The informal shelter had run-ins with the city who claimed that the shelter failed to properly document itself and that the residents were vagrant. They shuttered the shelter on the coldest night of the year, only to have Buddy come back in with bolt-cutters, re-opening it within hours. This happened three or four more times before the roof of the dilapidated structure caved in from the winter snow. The Drop Inn made one final move under Buddy Gray’s administration to a tall blue building where it remained for over fifteen years. In this building, the Inn managed to reach stability, housing

several hundred people on its busiest nights. From this building Gray also began working to build what would become the Over-the-Rhine Community Housing network, the central organization behind contemporary affordable housing in the neighborhood. It was from this blue building, a lookout at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Elm, that Gray and his team of social workers watched as the area begin to gentrify. It began quietly, Matt told us, the city silently handing over hundreds of tax-delinquent properties to private investors, who then handed them to 3CDC. The investors would buy out absentee owners, evict longtime residents and slowly let the buildings empty out—leases were not renewed.

“It’s about to get worse,” Matt said, his palms turned downwards as if to stop the narrative for a moment, “a lot worse.” More controversy came at Buddy Gray as the fallout of his successful prevention of the historic register measure held back some of the development. A faceless new community organization arose in Over-the-Rhine, they took out ads, bought billboards, and festooned the neighborhood with flyers and leaflets—their slogan: “No Way Buddy Gray.”

On each ad, they had a toll free number.

“If you called it,” Matt said, “they would tell you all these lies about Buddy, ‘Buddy is a poverty pimp,’ ‘Buddy Gray prevents job growth,’ ‘Buddy Gray keeps the poor poor.’” Matt acknowledged that we should be skeptical about the potential for Gray to have some sort of white-savior complex, that we should not over-valorize Gray or his accomplishments—nevertheless Matt seemed Aaronant about the good that Gray was doing.

He built a final scene for us, the culmination of the story that he had been weaving for well over forty-five minutes. Somewhere in the blue building that was the Drop Inn, the



administrators of the network of community housing that Gray had built were having a coordination meeting—Gray seemed to be at the head of the meeting, in my mind he was leaned forward over a table not unlike the one we were at. The meetings were open-door, anyone at any time could walk in to bring something to the board’s attention; on this day, one of Buddy’s friends—a Black man who suffered from mental-illness and chronic homelessness—walked in.

He raised his arm.

Gray looked up.

Three shots.

“He was assassinated,” Matt stated with finality.

Mysteriously, the hotline for “No way Buddy Gray,” went silent at approximately the same time.

The handgun which the homeless man had used was expensive, new, and untraceable—something that a mentally-ill man was unlikely to come across easily. Matt told us about how the unwitting assassin had been fed stories by someone about how Buddy was out for money, how he didn’t really care about the people in Over-the-Rhine, how he was really just out to use them for his own financial gain. Tragically, this man believed these stories and took the gun. Even worse, while Buddy’s friend was in prison he would still ask when Buddy was coming to see him—he did not understand what he had done, his mental-illness was that severe. His mental-illness had been used as a tool to take down this high-profile target. Within a day, new fliers about development in Over-the-Rhine came out—mysterious buttons celebrating Gray’s death were found in the Drop Inn.

“He was assassinated,” Matt reiterated, “and we know who did it!” His eyes again comically animated, leaning forwards over the table—then, a little quieter, falling back into his chair, “no, that’s conspiracy—I won’t share that. But we know.” It seemed like this story gave him purpose again, revived him just enough to seem more alive than he had when he had first walked in. His chest rose and fell more quickly than before, his arms crossed in front of him, a single blue vein pulsing slightly on his forearm.

“It would be more effective to see some of these places,” Matt said, “do you want to go on a tour?” I agreed, and he shrugged back on his jacket. “See you!” He called into the adjacent office. Matt took us out the back way, through a dark storeroom. “They’ve already locked up in front,” He explained. We exited into an alley, still lit by the early evening sun. A rusty fire-escape sat over a graffitied dumpster. The brick wall opposite the coalition was tagged in blue graffiti, small puddles dotted the alley. We headed for the sidewalk, a light overhead flickered on, washing us in harsh bluish light—it clicked and chirped, seemingly on the fritz.

“Hear that?” Matt asked, “That’s a mosquito box—do you know anything about hostile design?”

“Yeah,” I said—the movement to prevent the homeless from using any part of the public realm by installing strategic devices, including these annoying boxes, spikes in doorways, benches too short or wavy to sleep on, raised bumps on site-walls to make it uncomfortable to lie on.

“They just installed this one, it gives people headaches.” We would see many other such features throughout the neighborhood as we walked. We turned back onto the street that the coalition was on, crossing down towards the heart of the neighborhood. We walked quickly,



Matt pointing out buildings where people used to live—“the presence of diverse absences,”<sup>106</sup>—the buildings now all panache, brick gleaming, fresh glass and hip signs decorating the now “historic” facades. There was a haphazardness to Matt’s walk, he seemed to look over his shoulder often—maybe to see if we were keeping up, maybe to see if he was being followed. It was unclear how much of his narrative was truth and how much was conspiracy, everything wavered halfway between truth and fiction.

After several short stops, we came to a hollow space between two buildings. A mosaic-covered arch, some square planters, and plaques were placed inside the space between the two walls. A tree grew just behind the arch, its branches splayed perfectly between its peak—a small path wound aimlessly through the site.

The mosaics were made by children from Over-the-Rhine when it was still primarily a Black community. “Some of the material was salvaged, it took weeks to sort through everything,” Matt said. The top of the arch read “Imagine peace and unity,” but I could not. It seemed that the community was incapable of reconciliation, that there were two distinct worlds which existed on top of each other, and one was clearly winning out over the other. No amount of mosaic could cover over the bars which were slowly encroaching on the former homes of Black families, no amount of imagination could bring back what had been lost.

The sidewalk in this small park was cracked, a vestige—Matt explained—of the construction on the adjacent building (a 3CDC property) which had shut down this little park for months. The bar on the first floor of that buildings next door was highly exclusive, dinner began at thirty dollars a plate. When construction had finished, they had approached the coalition—who

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<sup>106</sup> Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 108.

owned the park—to ask if they would let the bar *have* the space that the park currently occupied so that they could build outdoor dining and seating.

They hadn't missed the park while it was closed, right?

Of course, the coalition refused—but the damaged sidewalk remained. Like the coalition's own building, this park, for all its childlike innocence, seemed poised for conflict. There was an open turf war playing out, a constant jockeying for space that had cost the community housing network over five hundred units of subsidized housing, as Matt had explained.

"But no one has been displaced, so they say," Matt cynically said. The cracks in the sidewalk went straight up to the arch. The branches of the tree stirred in a slight breeze as a woman walked her dog through the alley of the park. We followed, turning our own backs on the tree.

We turned to the left, walking behind cast-iron arches painted in blue and yellow—it was a business incubator, so Matt explained "the Brandery." It was the focus of a series of documentaries, a pivotal figure in the local redevelopment of the neighborhood. "It used to be a club," Matt said, "you know, untz untz untz untz," he went, remembering the pulse of dance music. He recalled coming here when the community was still "rough" while he was a student at the University of Cincinnati just at the top of the adjacent hill. "They were open till four AM," he explained—the latest any place stayed open in the area.

We were in the former alley, now a placid street lined with silvery cars glinting in the late evening light. A small park sat at the adjacent corner, quiet, unused. Matt felt distant, his eyes pointed towards the distant park—he stepped back into the raised stoop of the rear entrance to



the now famous Brandery. He recalled how this alley had been the beginning of the pursuit of Timothy Thomas, a young Black man, a victim of police brutality who had been unfairly profiled by police officers in the area, resulting in twenty-one outstanding traffic violations—the unfair burden of these citations upon Timothy resulted in a list of petty crimes and, eventually, a warrant placed on him for failure to show up in court. The worst crime he had committed was the failure to wear a seat belt. An off-duty officer, officer Roach, was in the area that night. Officer Roach, becoming aware of the list of charges and the outstanding warrant for Thomas’ arrest, called for him to stop—Matt charted out their journey for us. Thomas had fled down the alley, attempting to run from even more unfair harassment, and off towards the heart of Over-the-Rhine. The officer pursued—Matt became once again frenetic, his gestures pointing out the erratic paths of the officer and of Thomas as the two attempted to evade and find the other. In the end, the two collided in a dark alley, the officer shooting Thomas to death—he had perceived Thomas’ gesture to pull up his pants as a reach for a concealed firearm and had taken his life as consequence.

This weaponization of Thomas’ body—the belief the officer had that Timothy Thomas was, at heart, a dangerous individual, was built on an unfair racial profile that relied upon the systemic inequalities which still play out in Over-the-Rhine each day. Thomas’ death was the result of driving while Black, of a failure to wear a seat-belt, yet the officer in question perceived him to be a walking weapon—what else could a Black man with a warrant be? Thomas was perceived to be a danger to the community; the judge who decided the case against Officer Roach agreed, “This shooting was a split-second reaction to a *very dangerous situation* created

by Timothy Thomas,” Judge Winkler said. “Police Officer Roach's action was reasonable.”<sup>107</sup>

Even in the eyes of the justice, this once weed-choked alley and the Black man that had been running in it could only have been seen as something, *very dangerous*—or at least a danger to the white future of this community, a nuisance. Timothy Thomas was but another roadblock between the community as-it-was and the community as-it-could-be in the terms of the white developers of 3CDC; they saw the threat of Thomas to be that of an occupier, sitting on top of a site of economic power and influence, preventing “progress.” Thomas’ literal body was but another kind of “development,” part of an architecture that prioritized the removal of Blacks, another brick in the wall of Over-the-Rhine’s physical redefinition from a community of Black empowerment and solidarity, to a community of white separatism and opportunism.

Here Matt paused, we were standing in the park that had—moments before—been the site of Thomas’ death. Our feet were planted firmly upon the ground, yet my head swam with the complexity of the history that had just been relayed: white students at a club, a darkened alley, a Black man, a white cop—blood on the hands of Cincinnati. “There were huge protests,” Matt continued, “the city called them riots, but they were protests.” The Black members of Over-the-Rhine were outraged by the police brutality so clearly demonstrated in Timothy Thomas’ death; they came out as members of this oppressed community, they were there in solidarity with their fallen son, with their grieving mother—they saw Thomas’ death not as another point on the spectrum of Black deaths, but as a profound loss. Timothy’s death *was* and *is* their problem, a sign of the times and its constant “march onwards.” A literal sign, a sandwich board in fact,

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<sup>107</sup> Emphasis added. The Associated Press, “Cincinnati Officer Is Acquitted in Killing That Ignited Unrest,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 2001, sec. United States, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/27/us/cincinnati-officer-is-acquitted-in-killing-that-ignited-unrest.html>.



remains chained to a tree on the site of Thomas' execution. Some part, a few citizens within Over-the-Rhine refused to forget the truth. Citizens that have begun to be wiped out.

Over the days following the execution of Timothy Thomas, the city was gripped by some of the most public protests ever to grip the heart of the inner-city United States. These protesters, carrying the image of Thomas, hoisting signs carrying his name, forced themselves into the seat of power—the city council held emergency meetings, they were forced to negotiate with these voices that had for so long been literally pushed to the margins. They were finally given a seat at the table. And they were ignored. The council failed to pass any resolution of substance in response to Thomas' death, they pushed the debate to the side, hedged. They ended their emergency sessions by indicting the protestors as rioters, blaming the damage that had been wrought on the city in mourning on them.

We stood in the little, silent park, the corners of the four lots feeling as if they were leaning inwards. The city felt oppressive. The benches were too short. "The city mandated that if we were going to put a park here we had to use benches that were too short to sleep on," Matt said, his tone dejected. The park was sad, a wedge of space locked between the site of Thomas' execution, a former club turned business incubator, and a parking lot separated from us by a spiked fence. We were trapped like Thomas. We had no place to go. I pulled my jacket closer, remembering the movement that had condemned Timothy Thomas to death, knowing that my of

The wind stirred the branches of the tree.

Cincinnati felt like a tomb.

Matt told us about his own run in with law enforcement. His partner, a 6' 4" Black man, and him had been driving home after having lunch together in the area; they turned onto Liberty

street, a wide thoroughfare that cuts Over-the-Rhine virtually in half. His mind elsewhere as the jagged edge of the south side of the street passed by, Matt and his partner suddenly found themselves surrounded by squad cars, unmarked cruisers, and two SWAT vans—one of which had veered sharply in front of them, its rear doors bursting open to reveal six heavily armed and armored white men with loaded shotguns, their black boots glinting in the afternoon light. Matt and his partner were forced out of the car, they were separated—each of them forced to walk backward down the now jammed street, their hands behind their heads as they blindly approached the waiting officers in riot gear. Matt's partner was forced to the ground, handcuffed, and put into a police cruiser to be taken for questioning—Matt, on the other hand, was to simply be let go. The police tried to force Matt into a separate vehicle, but he protested, demanded to ride with his partner wherever he was going. The police relented and took the pair down to a station for questioning.

Later it was revealed that there had been an armed robbery in the region by a Black man who had managed to escape police custody. Matt's partner, a Black man driving a car, was identified as a potential suspect—his body was weaponized, he was seen as a threat. But the armed robber was only 5' 4" or so, a far cry from Matt's partner, a foot taller.

"It didn't matter," Matt said, regarding the height difference, "when I asked them how he had been a suspect when he clearly was not the same height, they said that it 'was enough that he was Black.'" He was "driving-while-Black," a crime punishable—as in the case of Timothy Thomas—by death. Matt was thankful that, at least, his partner had managed to survive, but the experience had clearly hardened him somehow. Standing there under the barren tree in that shabby park, his eyes seemed less bright than they had in the office of the Homeless Network, his jaw more resolute and solid. It seemed that this personal run-in—one marked by a nearly



comical level of cinematic danger, danger that was in fact very real and prescient, danger that in fact killed Timothy Thomas behind the club that Matt had frequented in his years as an undergraduate here—had made this fight more important than ever. Matt had been made a cynic, and now he was here to seek justice from a system that seemed increasingly merciless and fearful of the very people he worked day-in and day-out for.

Another breeze stirred the branches overhead, the tight alley we were in was dim and tinged by the blue light of evening. The space felt alive in a way that it had not when we arrived: Matt had shown us the hidden life, the invisible blood stains that marked this place, that made it his own space—his Cincinnati was for a moment no longer silent, his words had stirred the ghosts that for him were always hanging in these dark places.

We moved on, Matt's neon shoes laying out a path in front of us; a path out of the darkened hall of the alley.

We turned the corner, passing more brick facades, lights now flickering on in many windows. Before long we came to the Senate; a low wooden fence projected out onto the street, a pale yellow glow from vintage bulbs dripped out onto the pavement. Inside, a small group of white people sat together at a table, a white bartender pulled liquor from an upper shelf. An exclusive space.

Just past the Senate was a corner parking lot lined with young, thin trees; a Cincinnati Bell stop (a street-car that had cost millions of dollars, and multiple delayed years, to install), aluminum canopy glinting slightly in the early evening light, was situated on the edge of the adjacent sidewalk. No one waited.

Rounding the corner of the Senate, Matt directed our attention to what appeared to be a yellow parking meter; it read “donation station.” A Black man in red 3CDC sweater and knit cap, his cargo pants tucked into the tops of unlaced Timberland boots, stood just to the side of the meter, his arms folded behind his back, his chest puffed outwards, his eyes staring up and away.

“This is 3CDC’s attempt to prevent money from getting into the hands of the Homeless,” Matt said bluntly. The meter—one of five installed by the corporation in the city—came with a sign explaining how 3CDC was “committed” to improving the condition for those on the street and “improving its outreach programs.” It implored people not to give money to panhandlers as it may end up being used for drug money; instead they should put their money here so that 3CDC could allocate it in a responsible manner.<sup>108</sup>

“They put these in areas where they don’t want the homeless to sit and beg, and then put people like him,” Matt began, pointing to the man in the red sweater and cap, “to harass any ‘panhandlers’ and tell them they can’t sit there anymore.”

The man next to the meter shifted, his jaw set a little more tightly.

“But these meters,” Matt reached out, hitting the yellow body of the station with both hands several times, “just put funds back into 3CDC’s pockets, which they claim is being used for homeless outreach;”

The man next to the meter was clearly indignant; he scoffed, his arms unfolding to be crossed now across his chest. Matt continued.

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<sup>108</sup> Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, “Donation Stations,” Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, n.d., <https://www.3cdc.org/donation-station/>.



“But the money just gets spent on the Downtown Ambassadors, a group of old white men who walk around and pick up trash, offering directions to tourists.”

“Man, you don’t know *nothing*,” the man in the red sweater finally piped up, “that’s not where the money goes, it goes back to...”

Matt cut him off, “Goes back to the downtown ambassadors;”

“Where’d you read that?” The man shot back.

“You can find it on their website, just talk to Tracy;”

“Well maybe you should read a little better, cause if you talk to Rebecca—who heads the program—you’d know that this money goes to homeless outreach.”

“Yeah, that’s what they say but if you actually follow the money...” Matt pressed.

“Man, you’re stupid,” The 3CDC Worker sneered.

“Look man, I don’t have a problem with you,” he said then added, as an aside to me, “3CDC got in trouble for not having any Black employees a while back, so they hired individuals like him as public liaisons to come out and harass the homeless people on the street.”

The man in the red sweater, turned away from us his arms swinging forward in consternation, “I don’t harass anyone.”

“Yes you do,” Matt shot back.

“I just make sure that people know how to use this parking meter and watch the lot.”

“No you don’t, you harassed my friend Betsy for using the bathroom just the other day.”

“I didn’t harass anyone,” the man maintained.

“Yes you did!” Matt raised his voice, he turned around—now shouting across the street—  
“Betsy!”

“Oh my god,” the man in the cap said, his movements agitated.

“Hey Betsy, did this man harass you?!” Matt was addressing a small woman sitting with a cardboard sign on the opposite side of the street in a dark jacket cinched tightly around her face.

“YES HE DID!” Betsy yelled back, “I was just trying to pee, but he ran me out of there, threatened to bring the police in on me!”

“She was shooting up!” The man in the red sweater finally admitted, “She’s a drug addict!”

“She was just using the bathroom! It’s the only public bathroom in the area,” he added to me.

“She was using drugs—she’s a fucking addict!”

The confrontation continued to escalate, Matt and this man trading jabs. Matt reiterated that he did not have a qualm with this man, but the organization he saw as using him; the man—clearly identifying with this organization, seeing himself as a public face of something he believed in—was violently against this separation: he was, to some degree, 3CDC. His existence was dependent on the existence of the organization. Matt denied this man’s reality—the reality in which Rebecca was right and Tracy was wrong, the reality in which 3CDC was “bringing back the city,” the reality in which the set of five donation stations made a difference in the lives of people like Betsy, the reality in which Betsy was an addict and nothing more. This man likewise



denied Matt's reality—the reality in which the homeless were more than just victims, the reality in which Over-the-Rhine's false nostalgia was cloying and slimy, the reality in which Buddy Gray was a hero. The thin veneer of place that had been built up by the renewed urban gentrification cracked ever so slightly right here at this junction of Matt and the man in the red sweater: reality was not as it appeared, and both seemed willing to fight about it. There was an explosive amount of anger and hostility flaunted right here in the public realm; Matt had a chip on his shoulder—a chip possibly set by that confrontation he and his partner experienced on Liberty—but so did this man: who the hell was this white guy with this nameless white kid here yelling to him about his job? Who the hell was this man who made friends with a woman who was indeed a known drug addict? He was just here doing his job, man. There was something to that edge in his voice, the aggressiveness of his posture, the light in his eyes—a light not unlike the one we had seen in Matt's own eyes earlier—which reminded me of a zealot. The whole encounter felt irrevocably ideologically charged. Someone had to be right, the other had to be wrong; it was a life and death issue. More, it was the life and death of someone's reality over someone else's reality that was the issue.

Matt finally broke away, “yeah, yeah, whatever—anyway...” he pulled me away, the man in the red sweater swearing as he stormed away from his post. Matt spoke rapidly about a mural across the street, designed by a big-name artist from New York that 3CDC had pulled in; it had had a history of controversy around it—my mind remained on that confrontation as he spoke about the absolute cluelessness of the artist to the issues of Over-the-Rhine, their depiction of scenes and situations out of step with the life of the community itself; reality had momentarily fractured here: what was real? Whom was I to believe? Both men had been victimized by the system in some ways, but could I really believe that Matt's victimization stood on a similar level

as this Black man's who was—if Matt was correct—little more than a token-Black employee, a homeless bouncer for 3CDC? What about Betsy? She was somehow caught in the middle of this rift, her own life more contingent and dependent upon the existence of these two men than either Matt or the man in the red sweater.

“Thanks for singling me out, man” a voice piped up. It was Betsy, loping across the street, cardboard sign in hand. Coming closer, we could see her black coat—still cinched tight around her face—was worn over another jacket, a fuzzy quarter-zip with a black and pink geometric pattern; her pants were also black, her shoes a scuffed-up pair of black sneakers with a pink stripe around them, white treads wrinkled—well worn. Her face was tanned, dotted with freckles, wisps of brunette hair stole out between the tightened edges of her puffy jacket. Like Matt, her face was finely lined with nascent wrinkles—the freckles lined her pointed nose, slightly crooked in the middle, and the tops of her cheeks.

“Sorry about that,” Matt sounded sincere, “he just...” he trailed off, frustrated. He added some background about the park bathrooms, which were one of the few public spaces still accessible to the homeless population in Over-the-Rhine to use the restroom. Recently, cameras had been added to the exterior of the pavilions that housed the toilets and extra staff were brought to the area. Apparently, numerous resident complaints had cropped up about the homeless using these facilities and Betsy was one of the victims of an increased security presence around the park.

“I can't even use the bathroom anymore,” she said, moving her weight from foot to foot, her arms and torso adding comical emphasis to her words. She crossed her arms, lips pursed, defiant. “I was just going in, minding my own business, then I come out and they corner me—tell me they got me on camera shooting up. I was like ‘prove it,’ cause they didn't have jack one



me, I knew it. Then they threatened to call the cops on me and—look,” she said, her arms coming down, palms toward the ground as her left foot popped up, hips to one side, “I’m gonna be honest with you, you know I always tell the truth with you Matt; I had needles on me, so I was scared.”

“Yeah, but what are the police going to do?” Matt responded.

“*Exactly*,” Betsy said, indignant. “They don’t want to arrest me.”

Matt later told us that Betsy suffers from a heroin addiction, and that the police avoid arresting heroin addicts as much as possible. Once in the system, they are administered Methadone to combat some of the symptoms; many addicts attempt to get arrested precisely to receive this medication, something which they cannot receive on the streets. For some, it is a way to experience a high-like state, for others it is a way to have a temporary fix as they try and wean themselves off the addiction altogether. Either way these individuals, upon release, often suffer from withdrawal, many dying in, or immediately out of, custody; others need to be readmitted to medical facilities as soon as possible. Matt explained that for many, being arrested becomes a revolving door of methadone and addiction that, for the vast majority of cases, ends in death. And so the police avoid these arrests, they want nothing to do with heroin; they wanted nothing to do with Betsy when 3CDC reported her to them.

“It’s ridiculous,” Matt said.

“I know!” Betsy said, “but what are they gonna do, huh?” She said, her arms again crossing in front of her. “I tell ya, let them come after me—I’ll be ready, I say ‘bring it.’” Her lips again pursed, her hands pointed down the street to where the man in the red sweater had just been. Like Matt, she was ready for confrontation, primed for battle: she knew her rights and her

place within the city—in a sense she was untouchable, somebody that not even the extended hands of the system wanted to touch; in another sense she was the most vulnerable person we had met, her very right to use the bathroom was threatened. Yet she stood tall, her eyes set straight ahead.

Matt said goodbye, telling Betsy to take care of herself.

“You know it,” she shot back. She didn’t need well wishes.

As we left, she strode her way over to the Bell stop, right next to the yellow meter which said “absolutely no panhandling.” She took her sign back out, stopping a woman in a long and elegant black trench; the woman looked shocked, but was trapped by Betsy’s firm stance. The woman in the trench pulled her leather bag in tighter, knuckles white against the black skin; I smiled.

Betsy is fearless.

We made our way back up the district, pausing at the brick apartment block that used to belong to Buddy Gray; its red bricks had been painted blue, a 3CDC parking garage now encroached on its back lot. Nevertheless it stood tall. Matt took a second to recollect himself, his shoulders pulled in tight as he shook off the interaction he had just had with the man in the red sweater. It seemed that the interaction had affected him too. Within moments however, his attention had returned to the material world in front of him. He told us about how the building still belonged to Over-the-Rhine Community Housing, it was primarily home to low-income and rent subsidized units now. He told us about how it had almost been razed by 3CDC due to a fire that, nearly a decade back, had collapsed a portion of the exterior stair tower. The residents, defiant and with the help of the coalition, had rebuilt the collapsed portion brick by brick.



Even as he told us this story, his attention seemed elsewhere—the pace of his words had slowed slightly. He seemed tired. There was nothing else to say about the place, about the community that had been forced to literally rebuild again and again, about the threat of displacement, about the destruction of their community. It was simply too tiring.

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It was during the tour of Over-the-Rhine led by Matt that a friend of mine noticed a small box posted to the side of a stately wrought-iron fence, itself attached to the beige brick of a historic townhouse. A brass plaque just to the left of the stoop proclaimed that this address was protected with historical status. The little box seemed out of place; it was one of those plastic boxes that realtors put up to leave listing information at the door, just in case anyone wandered by to see the place and no one was there to meet them. This box, however, did not hold a list of how many baths or bedrooms there were in that house—which was clearly not for sale—instead, where it should have said “information” it said “poetry, take one.” I had nearly missed this small box, tucked to the side of the street, hidden by its placement in proximity to that proto-landmark of a home. It was so unassuming.

Inside the box was a gallon Ziploc bag marked by a thin band of purple and green. Slipped neatly inside was a thin stack of plain 8 & 1/2 by 11 papers, a column of words filled the space of less than one-half the sheet. It was a poem:

I am looking for her  
in all the wrong places  
like in the children's book,  
*Where is Spot?*  
Spot needs to come home.  
  
Is she beneath cardboard  
box lids and homeless signs?  
In the eyes of one holding them?

But those eyes do not betray her  
 only share the code of  
 the streets.

Is she in dark corners where I  
 stumble and find cats  
 at work on last night's  
 salmon from the five star?  
 Though cats have nine lives  
 it's doubtful any one of these  
 belonged to her.

Is she  
 in mission churches  
 seen through boarded windows  
 standing between clothes lines  
 and food stamp queues  
 impatient at the counter of a  
 grimy liquor store  
 paying for a fifth without a cent?

No, no, no . . .

Steps I skulk  
 on downtrodden sidewalks  
 with orange glow shoes  
 are my beacons of hope

For her  
 light shining, cutting through her darkness.

Maybe it will be enough  
 to find her and not the why  
 maybe it will be enough  
 to find the why and not her  
 to have the moment  
 when Spot is found  
 right there, in a basket  
 where I can carry her away.<sup>109</sup>

It was a shockingly prescient poem. Missions, food stamps, liquor stores, the homeless, filth. But  
 there was no name, no author on that sheet.

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<sup>109</sup> Annette Januzzi-Wick, "Have You Seen Her?" n.d., <https://gettinmycityon.wordpress.com/>.



As my friend withdrew that sheet from its plastic sheathing and returned the remainder to the box, just across the street a man in a gray hoodie sat, still in the late afternoon light, holding a cardboard sign whose plea for help I cannot now recall. “Is she . . . In the eyes of one holding them? / But those eyes do not betray her / only share the code of / the streets.” Was the author calling that man’s eyes soulless, empty?

It seemed, at that moment, as if this poem was an admonition. It talked of grime and filth, of poverty and welfare, of a city that seemed tinged with fear for this writer—they talked most of all about getting away, of striking a path, of finding something or someone and taking them far away from here. It felt like the poem took place in some red-neon-drenched draconian landscape; in my mind, the poem took place right here, Over-the-Rhine in 2018, a gentrified and white-washed space marked still by the memory of “crime” and “danger” and so-called “riots.” This poem can only have taken place in what once was a majority low-income Black neighborhood less than a decade ago, because within those words were the same fears and judgements which slip so easily, so fecklessly out of the lips of people I have told that I have been there:

“Isn’t that place dangerous?”

“Weren’t you afraid?”

“Tell me you didn’t stay after sunset?!”

In these words lie borders, boundaries, separations; they indicate the imposition of an order that was forced upon the city as a means to transmute it from mere unarticulated mass into a productive organ—a body of capital. Don’t go there, you don’t belong there.

I watched small children shooting hoops nearby.

Were they afraid?

A Black man rode by on a child's bike, basket laden with plastic Kroger bags.

I stood a world apart from them; here I stood next to that beige brick home, that estate in the inner city—this was not the dirty sidewalk which appeared repeatedly in the poem, instead it was a sidewalk that had been so neatly cleaned of the “grime” and “filth” which it describes but a short time ago. Where I stood was a sidewalk that had been prepared for the steps of other, richer, whiter peoples.<sup>110</sup> This cleaning had helped build new boundaries as the neighborhood had been rewritten from Black to white—it had pushed the low-income residents farther and farther north, just past Liberty Street which neatly bisects the neighborhood. This street, a busy five lane thoroughfare, is now a line that demarcates the border between the gentrified southern portion of the neighborhood and the not-yet-totally-gentrified northern region. Past Liberty is a space still full of Black residents who sit out in the streets during the day, a space still full of children who play on the asphalt, a space still home to a dwindling number of mom-and-pop stores and bodegas. Unlike this southern portion of the neighborhood, northern Over-the-Rhine is still full of slumlords who greedily eye the slow, painful encroachment of the Bourgeoisie. Inside that northern region are markers of that coming wave: there is a historic and bustling market, a craft brewery, and numerous third-wave coffee shops—falling footsteps, expensive shoes.

The poem's presence and location indicated the identity of the author—on the side of that house, attached to that silent iron fence, enclosed in a realtor's box, kept dry in a fussy plastic bag, a stack of clean and crisp white pages—it was hard to image that the writer could be anything but white. Perhaps they were even the owner of that home whose beige brick had been

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<sup>110</sup> Woodard, “How Cincinnati Salvaged.”



so fastidiously cleaned of the grime that supposedly once marked it. When I found this poem, it felt like an affirmation of the gentrification that has gripped the region, or perhaps a memory of white flight: “to have the moment / when Spot is found / right there, in a basket / where I can carry her away.”<sup>111</sup>

To be embraced in a mothers’ arms, to be hurriedly packed in an overstuffed station-wagon, to move out to the neat suburbs full of slap-dash but picture-perfect homes, to be carried away—an affirmation of difference, a reconstruction of borders and walls.

This white person wrote cluelessly about homelessness and urban poverty as if it were nothing more than a fixed and escapable condition, a stage-setting, a fact of the matter that was the city—they were not there to understand it, not there to engage with it, but to flee from it, to keep it in back alleys with scrounging cats, to keep it away from someone . . . a daughter? A pet? Themselves? It was unclear.

Bound up in those words were the fear which has trailed behind the white person for so long as they have flown from place to place: “the city was just too crowded, you know?”

Too crowded with whom?

At the bottom of the page, there was a short phrase “Visit [gettinmycityon.wordpress.com](http://gettinmycityon.wordpress.com) to learn more.” I followed the link.

The website I found was set in a pseudo-typewriter font—thin flat serifs, a fake-looking font. The top of the page was filled edge-to-edge with a banner featuring a grainy image of what appeared to be a rain-soaked street in the nighttime, devoid of people. The name of the poem’s

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<sup>111</sup> Januzzi-Wick, “Have You Seen.”

author appeared in small, blue type just under the title of her most recent post—then a prose piece full of thick and syrupy language that over-described each moment of the author’s morning routine as a man named Matt (assumedly her husband) prodded and praised her about how she was on the “best of” Cincinnati list under the heading “best local author”—Annette Januzzi-Wick.

I clicked over to her “about” page, ready to have my own suspicions confirmed: gentrifier, conservative mother, close-minded woman.

What I read next changed my entire opinion.

She was indeed a gentrifier: “This blog . . . is based on her experience of moving to [the] inner city from the suburbs.”<sup>112</sup> She moved to Over-the-Rhine, so it seems, during her second marriage which followed fifteen years after the cancer-related death of her first husband. It was this death which itself brought her to writing: “after his death, she penned a memoir, *I’ll Be in the Car: One Woman’s Story of Love, Loss and Healing* . . . ‘When I finally started writing, I learned what I thought and felt again.’”<sup>113</sup>

This was not the language of someone who was building boundaries; these were the indications that Annette did indeed feel frictions, resistances—the loss of boundaries. Yet what changed my view the most about this person was the acknowledgement she made in her own biography that experiencing the city and the people that have struggled to live within it for so long has essentially changed her as a human being:

I’m not, by nature, a political person, but once you’re living in proximity to poverty, once you are side by side in the grocery store with a mother who pulls the generic chicken broth off the shelf, and while you stand there, holding your can of Swanson’s broth, you

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<sup>112</sup> Annette Januzzi-Wick, “About Annette,” Blog, Gettin’ My City On, n.d., <https://gettinmycityon.wordpress.com/contact-information/>.

<sup>113</sup> Januzzi-Wick.



can't help but take stock of your policy leanings. How did white flight originate, what is holding back others from home ownership, employment? I tutor a group of young, African-American students after school. I see so much potential and yet wonder, how many of them will have the opportunity to rise? I never thought that, when I tutored at my kid's school in the suburbs.<sup>114</sup>

It was small, and even potentially classist, but it was there: standing side by side with people who are not like you *forces* you to reconsider what you thought you knew about that person—about yourself. There, in that soup aisle of that grocery (likely the Vine Street Kroger), Annette experienced the loss of a boundary which for so long she was surrounded by in the suburbs, the loss of the boundary between her economic class and the one just below her. And while she seems to judge this mother, who saves even just the few cents that separate a box of Swanson's and the generic Kroger brand of chicken broth, there in that paragraph she acknowledges that there is something wrong here—how many others will have the chance to rise, is the deck stacked? There, in that sentence, she undertakes a resistance of her own as she seeks to understand why it is that she, a mother herself, can afford the difference between the generic and the brand name. She asks why it is that she has never had to think about the fact that there is a price difference between the two—she just bought the brand name and moved on. But not here. Not in Over-the-Rhine. Suddenly, it is not so little of a difference. Suddenly, buying broth is not a frictionless experience. Moving here, to the inner-city of Cincinnati, everything has changed. That moment has reshaped her politically. She says that living in the inner-city has made her slide “on the scale from conservative to compassionate.”<sup>115</sup> A laughable remark, and yet . . .

And so I took a step back—that poem I had read, that poem which cast the city in flat, one-dimensional terms (the rich and the poor, the clean and the dirty), was not the full story. This was not just some gentrifier—nameless and faceless people whom I had moments before been so

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<sup>114</sup> Januzzi-Wick.

<sup>115</sup> Januzzi-Wick.

enraged by through Matt's dialogue. Behind that poem and that clean brick house was a complex person undergoing a social and political transformation. Here was a woman open to change, who was forced to reshape herself by nature of her very reoccupation of a formerly Black space; she has come to understand that her actions have consequences: she hits it on the nose in her bio, *white flight*. She understands that she is part of a problematic population, that it is her own movement from the city to the suburbs and back again that is the source of Over-the-Rhine's issues; she understands that that moment in the Vine Street Kroger is not as simple as generic and brand name, that right there next to her is not just some poor person—no, that person there is a *mother*, a mother with children just like Annette's, children whom she must feed. Perhaps it is even the knowledge which Annette has collected over her years of caring for others (her children, her dying husband, her mother with Alzheimer's) which allowed her to not only acknowledge there in that soup aisle that the boundary between their two classes had been crossed, but to actually step momentarily across it and into the shoes of that woman; it is her identity as a mother which gives her the ability to even be attuned to the fact that a friction is present here, and she is in fact its source.

Yes, Annette is a gentrifier.

Yes, Annette is a rich white woman.

Yes, Annette has made problematic remarks.

But just like the workers from BorgWarner, Annette has found a way to take up action in response to a friction; and this has allowed her to become critical and vocal: she uses her writing as a platform to give voice to other undervalued peoples—she tutors Black children after school, she leads writing workshops for women with disabilities and cancer—she uses her writing as a



tool to investigate the city which exists around her—over the past few years, she has undertaken a project to physically walk the border of all fifty-two neighborhoods that comprise Cincinnati and document her experiences with the spaces and people she met along the way; it has forced her to become intimately aware of the boundaries and walls literally written into space as peoples are divided into groups and classes.<sup>116</sup> By inhabiting this neighborhood, by taking up her writing practice, she has been able to become attuned to the very existence of the boundaries and oppressions and structural forces of control that we have seen inscribe themselves into the fabric of Over-the-Rhine for centuries.

And so Annette makes me stop for a second and look around: how many other gentrifiers have felt the shock of their own action register beneath them? How many of these other white and affluent people understand that they are standing on streets that were literally stolen out from under Black families who were themselves forced out of other neighborhoods and regions of the United States? How many other people have stood in that soup aisle in that Kroger on Vine Street and even noticed, as Annette did, that there is something wrong here?

What a laughable experience, how easy it would be to shake off the thirty cent difference as little more than a deplorable situation—how I have heard my own parents deride the women who come into the grocery with food stamps and WIC checks, calling them worthless and lazy, riding off of the “generosity” of the state as they pick through the measly number of items that they have even been allowed to choose from; perhaps without this, they would starve—and their children would starve with them. It would be so easy to think nothing of these people—worse, to think of them as less than nothing, as garbage, as waste, as *literal* wastes of money and tax

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<sup>116</sup> Januzzi-Wick; Annette Januzzi-Wick, “Gettin’ My City On,” Blog, Gettin’ My City On, n.d., <https://gettinmycityon.wordpress.com/>.

dollars—to go about one’s day and not stop to reflect on how that single moment in that singular space echoes out across all of our other daily landscapes. This woman does not only exist here in the space of this store, she is also your neighbor, she is also affected by the fact that you take up space. It is more than the difference between brand name and generic. It is sociological.

What marks the difference between Annette and the people, like my own parents, who might write off these differences and go about their lives is merely geographical: Annette lives at the edge of a border which is here decaying because of her own presence, while these other people are constrained in their own way by the boundaries that they accept. Boundaries that are marked by the edges of their car as it glides smoothly, frictionlessly, across the tarmac of interstate 65 south and away from this other woman, this woman holding the box of generic chicken broth.

Annette is a gentrifier, and she knows it.

Annette is a friction-causing body, and she feels it.

And is that not enough? Is that not the start of a resistance that could be transformative for not only her, but also that other woman if we allowed it to take its course, to become a trajectory, a line-of-flight? What is so unique about the situation which gentrification momentarily provides is the space that it opens up to come face to face with the people that you are forcibly removing, the dissolution of a boundary. It is that moment when you see them, when you meet their gaze and feel that some unspoken boundary has been crossed, that can become generative: a spark, the shock of recognition—it is a human being that stands across from me. Gentrification is undoubtedly a negative force, a thing which rebuilds boundaries in ways that



are oppressive and exclusionary, but in that moment when the gentrifier and the oppressed are forced to coexist there is a possibility: a friction.

In some small way, I find hope in that small moment of friction. There is suddenly tension in the life of the gentry, something that has rarely been present is suddenly front and center, they are confronted with an oppositional force—and so they *must resist*, even if that resistance is nothing more than to bear the brunt of the heat, there is irrevocable change. Isn't heat a force of change? Isn't even the weakest of steels transmuted via heat to become that little bit stronger? Is it possible that in that moment of confrontation, when the gentrifier is forced to see up close the humanity of the other that they have been striving to avoid, even if the resistor merely stands resolute against the friction, that there can be change?

Perhaps it is the fear of this kind of change which causes other, more negative resistances—as when the manager of an Over-the-Rhine based housing-first shelter told me about a condo owner next door who calls the police each time one of his residents stands too long at the back door of his shelter. Perhaps it is the fear of change which drives gentrifiers to cross the street when they see a homeless person, or to look skyward or at the depths of their phones if they must cross too close to them—they are terrified of that friction, that tension which they have successfully avoided for so long, the acknowledgement that these other beings are human beings *just like them*.

Annette gives me hope because in her writing I see the possibility of a generative resistance. In her writing, I see the breaking down of boundaries that have separated her from the “others” that white children have been taught from a young age to fear. In her writing, and in her living, there is the origin of a possible line of flight that takes her deeper and further into the depths of these frictions in a way that might allow her to bring others up, to rise with her. Here,

at the intersection of her life and the life of that other mother, is the ground of change that friction asks us to renegotiate. How she takes up the resistance to these forces will determine the valence and direction of these resistances, but it seems as if she has already begun—she has changed, she says so, and her writing has changed with her.

Maybe I am wrong to find hope here, in this moment of friction generated by gentrification—it is such an unspeakably evil practice—but it was this poem, this clueless and honestly bad poem, which gave it to me. What a complex and contradictory woman there is behind it, what a promising potential there is in this line of flight—and surely she is not the first to feel this sting, surely she is not the first to recognize that there are more complicated forces at play in our lives and the choices that we make. Surely she is part of a larger, as-of-yet unformed movement that could begin to call attention to these contradictions caused by the breaking down of the boundaries that have for so long separated us, race and class and gender. Surely she could use this writing to pull herself, hand over hand, out of the one-dimensional, uncritical life which she has lived for so long and begin to call attention to the structure and makeup of the city—as it seems she has already begun in her series of reflections on those fifty-two separate neighborhood walks.

Nevertheless this potential lies untapped, her resistances remain constrained to herself, and this little blog, and that small plastic box attached to the side of that black iron fence; and while it would be a mistake to say that that is not enough, to say that her own transformation and the initial projects which have come out of it are worthless—they are not—it also seems like it would be a mistake to say that this is the origin of a future of liberation. Not enough resistances have been coalesced together. She remains one woman with one blog and one box and one, honestly bad, poem. There is, as of yet, no movement, no call to stop the march of gentrification



as it continues to push families farther and farther north until, at long last, the neighborhood shall be white and full of the affluent, the one-dimensional, the reigned-in peoples who may now return to their frictionless lives.

And so the city remains only just tense. It remains statically charged, waiting for some conflagration that might, in truth, never come. It remains flat, starkly contrasted, it feels as one-dimension and as simplistically painted as it is in Annette's poem:

Dark corners where I  
stumble and find cats  
at work on last night's  
salmon from the five star?

. . . mission churches  
seen through boarded windows  
standing between clothes lines  
and food stamp queues  
impatient at the counter of a  
grimy liquor store  
paying for a fifth without a cent?

No, no, no . . .

Steps I skulk  
on downtrodden sidewalks  
with orange glow shoes  
are my beacons of hope.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Januzzi-Wick, "Have You Seen."

*Rob, Detroit 2018; Daniel Esper, Cincinnati, 2016 & 2018*

The Boggs Center stands on the corner of Goethe and Field St.; it looks nothing like a center, instead appearing in the form of a brick-and-stone craftsman-style home—two stories, with leaded-glass windows and red woodwork, rustic roof tiling and copper downspouts. We were early, getting out to take a look at the little free library that I remember being put up a year ago; it was full of pamphlets and a few ragged novels. To the side of the house, a car sat idling; the street was relatively quiet, a daytime neighborhood. We began to walk down Goethe only to realize that the idling car belonged to Levi, just arriving to open the center. He waved, unclear of who we were. Joining us on the sidewalk, he asked us about our purpose in Detroit, why we had come to the Boggs Center. We were met in the entry by a magazine rack, holding the collected articles—photocopied onto cheap paper—of the center’s late namesake. Levi nonchalantly passed by it, making his way up the staircase flanked to the side by a now defunct chairlift. Together we headed up the steps of the center, Robert arriving a few seconds later by car just as we headed inside. We walked after him, turning the corner into the headquarters of the center itself, festooned with images of and quotes by Jimmy & Grace, literature stacked everywhere, a ring of folding chairs and tables set up by the fireplace, facing the large windows that overlooked Field Street, the front yard, and the little library. Levi bustled about, grabbing mail, mumbling inaudibly about the organization.

“Shea will be by later to pick up this stack of stuff,” he said, addressing a pile of pamphlets and literature informally banded together, recalling that we had mentioned our interest in meeting her. Robert’s footsteps were heard on the stairs, Levi greeted him.

“Are you Mr. Spellman?” I asked,



“Depends, who’s asking?” He replied, not joking about his desire for anonymity.

“I’m Ben Slightom, I said—and this is my friend Noah.”

“Then yeah, I’m Robert,” he said, smiling and extending his hand. I shook it, then he passed to Noah in turn. We stood for a second as he put down his coat, looked around, helped Levi with a few things—then he directed us to a sitting room to the side, two recliners and a couch by a makeshift bar covered in coffee-related things. The entire place felt temporary, even though the center had run out of this house for decades. The shelves holding the books were screwed simply into place, folding chairs and meeting spaces were paired with more ornate but functional domestic pieces of furniture. Poster-sized newspaper articles written about Grace adorned the walls, laminated, declaring her presence in the community. There appeared to be no boundary between living and organizing for the now deceased namesakes of the organization—they flowed together, each a natural extension of the other.

Rob had long been a union organizer, working on the line at the Detroit Chrysler plant before its eventual downsizing. Even so, he spoke infrequently about his history at the front of United Auto Workers strikes, of being a bargainer, a leader. He seemed to be in the moment, concerned about the here and now. He told us more about the writings he was working on, the people he was reading, the theories and ideas he was interested in than his own past. His conversation pointed sharply to the political situation we were in, how he saw the threat of nationalism and power structures, how there is an international interest in Detroit as a testing-ground for building better futures. He seemed fully aware of the eyes on him and the city to fulfill its promise of being the “movement city.” Embedded in his story was the nuanced racial and social-historical history of Detroit; an admission of the role of Michigan’s geography in the city’s unique composition and land area—he was interested in building local solutions, bringing

together a community of people to stand up and support each other, to move from a system of global capital to a localized and focused social economy founded on individuals contributing to a collective good.

He touched on diverse issues: food security, material self-determination, history, geography, politics, the racial tensions of the city; every time, pointing to a book on one of the screwed-in shelves that related to the topic. He seemed vastly committed to building a real community, to engaging himself with others through individual and community conversations, to supporting the work and lives of others in order to begin networking together the small community-based projects to work as a collective. He touched on how transformative digital communication has been for helping them organize, how much closer it has put him to all of the people he has worked with, how much easier it has been to publish, to make outreach happen, to get the network together that he wants to see. He was constantly sending us live links to material, to people, to websites and books via email as we talked. He was also excited about the advent of digital fabrication movements, the implications it had for creating material security and self-determination for the people of Detroit. He pushed us to go see a recent social start-up program—The Detroit Maker Force. He said that they were helping to build the future, but that without support from other organizations, it was just a fanciful idea. “The big move in the next ten years is from emergence to *convergence*.” We have the base, he said, we need to begin creating the connections it needs to survive and to begin creating real material consequences.

Here he seemed to recognize that his emphasis on rejecting and subverting the current social system left him a daunting task. The Boggs Center had taken a hard line against perpetuation of the current system in any way. They were idealists in that sense, looking to bring about systemic social change purely from the outside, from building the subterranean community



necessary to begin the shift. He admitted that the center had struggled to bring about concrete results, despite its long history and its clear investment in local projects. He hinted at playing a long game with the mission and goals of the institution he was helping to helm. There was no way he was going to engage in the current institutions other than to protest them, he had to build these systems from a fresh start, he had to keep them pure because if they were to pick up the ideological taint of the original system's structure, then his mission was for naught. He implied a three-hundred year timeline for this social change and that the best that he could do right now was to make the lives of the people immediately around him a little better, a little freer than they were before.

We asked him who we should talk to next; he immediately pulled out his phone and dialed up a friend—Carlos. There was a clear tenderness in his voice as he talked with him. Carlos mentioned that he and his wife were sick right now, and it was making it hard to make ends meet. Robert lamented with him, offered his emotional support—laughed along at jokes. He seemed genuinely concerned for Carlos, emotionally and socially there in solidarity with him. His next immediate call was to Carlos' wife, with whom he shared his well-wishes. They too laughed and talked as friends. He asked her about her son, concerned about the well-being of her and her family. Here Robert showed us his deep commitment and embeddedness in the community; he really was building the network he stressed so much, he really was there in solidarity with people. As we wrapped up our conversation, he sent us away with stacks of literature written by the Center and the community.

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The first visible signs of Over-the-Rhine and Cincinnati as we descended off of the interstate was the hulking brick presence of the music hall. It stood as a monolithic wall, turning

its back on the old West End neighborhood, previously home to numerous families of color and minorities. Today it is home primarily to the interstate which was built by the city itself, a tool for facilitating white flight from the inner-city neighborhoods. As we turned past the hall, we found a neighborhood of pristine brick, buildings with character and history neatly arranged, a tight bundle along the street. Hidden by a series of facades, marked unassumingly with a simple red canopy, sits the Levitt House—named in honor of the photographer and social activist who had been a pivotal figure in local advocacy for the homeless. The Heath house is a unique program, operated by the Over-the-Rhine Community Housing Network. It is the first and only housing-first shelter in Cincinnati, it houses individuals suffering from chronic homelessness and addiction in a no-questions asked facility.

The Heath House is managed by Daniel Esper, a stout and determined-looking man white with a full white beard, a jovial smile lined with wrinkles, and thickly veined arms. He often wears black, today including a black knit cap and a signature silver wallet chain. We were greeted at the door by a resident who helps run the office, and were shown in. Daniel was busy finishing some important business and had us wait in the common area just adjacent to the office. The Heath House is composed of five historic row houses, now linked by a series of whimsical interior ramps and stairs. Its interiors are cleanly divided, full of light and wood, made up of neat and tidy details which give the facility a distinct air of solidity and permanence. It houses fourteen apartment units and is capable of housing twenty-five residents at a time. The buildings were given over for development by the controversial development corporation Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, known simply as 3CDC.

Daniel joined us in the common area, and then moved with us into the kitchen—partitioned off by tall sliding wooden doors. “What would you like to know?” he began. I asked



him quite simply to tell us how he became involved in the house and homeless advocacy. In response, he began to tell us his life story—it seemed that we could not understand why he was here doing this work unless he began fully at the beginning.

“I lived here, I was from a place called Madisonville,” a place separated into two distinct areas: Madisonville and Madison Place. The difference, he went on, was not in class but in race. Both communities were poor, “blue-collar families,” Daniel explained. Madison Place, however, was white. Madisonville was Black. Daniel’s father was a journalist and taught him from an early age to question the way things were; the racial divisions of Madisonville were a source of ire for his father and came to form the basis of Daniel’s own education in the social disparities that are the foundation of U.S. society. He continued that he was constantly confounded by these obvious disparities.

Daniel described his first experience of Over-the-Rhine, the community where he now works as the director of the Heath House. He was coming into the city off the interstate, much like I had just done, and the man driving—a local resident—had pointed to the neighborhood dismissively, “that’s ni\*\*\*rtown.” Frustrated by the apparent impenetrability of these social issues in Cincinnati, Daniel left to study art in Seattle, Washington. There, he felt liberated to speak his mind about these issues, to engage with political and social activism in a way that he had never been able to when he was entrenched in the facts of these situations first hand. One class in particular, “primitive art”—a post-feminist deconstruction of traditional art-historical narratives of white male power, taught by a woman of color—was “transformative,” it changed the way that he thought about and interacted with the world. Even in his activism there, which he spoke of in broadly grand and fond terms—“it was really something,”—he felt the flatness of this activism. He felt that the collective subsumed the individual, everyone agreed with each

other and the activism—while inspiring—was largely without a point: everyone understood the problems which this society faced. “There I was just another green anarchist,” he continued, “but I always felt like the real problems were here.” After years of refusing to accept and work within the systems of power that he had come to loathe and critique, after seventeen years of moving in and out of different college programs, after involving himself in a cohort of activists that made him but another point on a spectrum of liberal ideology, he felt the hollowness of this refusal toward substantive action. He felt compelled to return to the Middle West, to return to Cincinnati to confront the inequality that had been formative in his own political beliefs. Here he involved himself in social work, built a network, learned the intricacies of the urban housing policies, began involving himself in the systems which he had fought so long to critique in order to make actual ground on these issues that he felt so strongly about.

Daniel believes that the system has created such inherent disparities between people that when we see an individual on the streets, we cannot see reality. “When you see a man standing on the freeway exit, drenched in sweat, breathing-in exhaust fumes, begging for help—and it’s ninety degrees outside, most people don’t see someone in a desperate situation. Instead they say ‘fuck him, he’s probably got a Cadillac stowed somewhere.’” We have been so convinced by the presence of marginal cases of fraud, been placated by master narratives that paint the homeless as sinister individuals plotting to take your money that we cannot see the truth of the reality before our eyes: there is a man in clear distress begging for our help. Here he turns to theory to explain the apparent divide; he quotes Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* in which the individual, placated by capital, convinced further and further by the system that they are an individual existing outside of the social network, becomes alienated not only from the collective but from themselves: they begin to develop fears and anxieties about themselves that then reflect



upon the world, are imposed upon others. The man on the side of the highway is not given the benefit of the doubt about their own reality because the individual fears for the security of their own reality. And so the man on the side of the highway has his reality denied in order to ensure the existence of the individual's more fragile and weakened one.

Daniel emphasized the continual exclusion of individuals who are homeless from our own moral reality. "People assume that because they are homeless, they must experience reality differently than we do. 'Oh, they must be used to the cold,' even though you're standing there and you're fucking freezing—don't you think they feel it too?" There is such a cognitive disconnect between the constructed social narrative of the homeless and their true lived reality that we cannot even bring ourselves to acknowledge their basic humanity. This is the work that Daniel now fights to do, to bring dignity and privacy to people who, for so long, have been prevented from living whole lives; their every action is caught in the public realm, available for scrutiny and dismissal as indicative of an individual condition, of an unfortunate result of personal history.

What stood out most about Daniel's story was his emphasis on the need for real livable solutions for these individuals *now*. He was unequivocal: "yeah, I've taken money from the system," but how else was he supposed to get the funds he needed to provide them with the stability they lacked? He had no problem going against the ideologies he had espoused in Washington State, "I have no problem using other people's money." He admits that he has been called out by activists as a sell-out, succumbing to the system's promise of wealth in exchange for running their programs for them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the development of the properties needed for the Levitt House by the agent of gentrification in Over-the-Rhine, 3CDC. Even though he is part of this expansive system, his work remains fundamental in

providing actual, visible, tangible support for individuals whose lives have been made contingent by the system.

He raises the question, without stating it, of what truly matters: being a hardline radical whose policies and ideas will not be implemented because of refusal to compromise, or an agent of change whose work can take advantage of the system as it can, can offer real substantive change? Esper's work and life stands, for me, in strong contrast to the life and work of Robert Spellman. Spellman's commitment to building local, anti-systematic, grass-roots funded and run organizations—his refusal to engage inside and with the systems that he wishes to critique—make him a hardline radical. Esper, on the other hand, acknowledges the systemic social-historical master narratives that have created these situations of urban crisis, but refuses to be an ineffective combatant: as much as he knows he is a “sell-out” he also knows that he has changed the course of life for actual individuals. I remember now Spellman's own comment about the failure of the center to produce empirical, observable results in the city: “we should have quantitative results right now, we should be able to show that.” In Detroit, fighting the system, rebuilding and redefining the meaning of social and physical capital has proven to be a daunting task. Meanwhile, here in Cincinnati—in the midst of a thriving movement to gentrify the inner city—we can count the numbers of lives that have been affected by Daniel Esper.



*Kenny, Detroit, 2018*

We pulled onto Heidelberg Street, plywood clocks, mannequins, and Technicolor dots populating every corner of the visible field. We parked, got out, began to stroll among the art. A Black man, dressed in winter overalls, a heavy jacket, and a thick black beanie was walking down the street—he waved and said hello; his name was Kenny and he was helping to take care of the project. My partner, then a little behind a tree, peeked around to better see him;

“Oh look at him, peeking around that corner,” Kenny started, “look at them shoes! Those were the shoes Run DMC used to wear. What were they called, uhh...?”

“Superstars?” Noah offered, pointing his shoe towards the pavement, offering the branded name on the side in the dusk light for Kenny to read.

“No no, it was S-something... a name...” Kenny didn’t finish, but I think he meant “Stan Smiths,” a similar looking pair of shoes. He pointed out the houses on the street we could photograph, emphasizing the third on the left—“they don’t like people taking pictures of their house much, they put up signs about it.” His gaze swept across the length of the street, seeing the vacant lots towards the end—he told us about the houses that used to be down there.

“Do you think that ash from a house way down there could start a fire on this house here?” Kenny asked, pointing to one at the opposite end of the block.

“No,” I said,

“Yes it can! Ash can travel for over a mile and still cause a fire—it’s still hot enough.” He pointed to the exposed rafters on the roof, charred. The Heidelberg Project had long been

plagued by fires, the city burning down two of the houses themselves, other mysteriously igniting in the night without apparent cause—the city refused to investigate those.

Kenny's gaze shifted again, now looking at a tall, dead tree with clocks all over it. He told us about an incident a few weeks ago where the heavy storms had caused a big branch to snap off and fall on a white truck parked there; "totaled it" he said.

His attention shifted again, now to the late hour and his hunger. "Mmm-mm," he began, "my lady is making beef pepper steak, with tomatoes and rice, big ol' peppers in it." I told him we didn't want to keep him if he wanted to get home, "nah, I'm gonna work up a nice big appetite for that," he said with a grin. He mentioned how it had been cold lately, his house didn't have gas—he was a squatter. "We've been burning kerosene for weeks," it was an expensive prospect, "If you could help out man, even one dollar makes a difference." Noah offered ten. "Thank you man," Kenny said, slipping it into his glove.

His attention shifted again, he started walking down the street, pointing out the "record shop" on the other side of the block—an installation that was part of the Heidelberg Project, a kind of deconstructed house covered in records and salvaged signs, it was a prominent piece of the artwork. He shifted his attention to another house, purple and green with a charred roof on it as well.

"That's not a part of the Heidelberg Project," Kenny said. He explained that it belonged to Tim Burke, an artist who ran an independent gallery. The house used belonged to Burke, but had recently been the victim of its own arson. Kenny was good friends with Tim and was helping him fix it up.



“Aw man,” Kenny interrupted himself. “You *gotta* see these, Tim made these in a day—with a *chainsaw*!” He hurried us over, pointing out six tall, skinny, grinning figures with pointed, cat-like ears. “Ain’t that talented?” He told us they were recent, carved after the fire from the charred rafters of the ceiling; “he just started cutting off the burnt pieces, getting down to good wood,” and then they turned into these totems—now brightly painted, some polka-dotted, others not. The front of the house had a message scrawled sign on it, “this is not the Heidelberg Project, this is not the Heidelberg Project, this is not the Heidelberg Project, this is not the Heidelberg Project,” over and over. Kenny explained: Tim and Tyree—the artist behind the Heidelberg Project—used to be partners, Tim helped out where he could. When Burke’s studio caught fire, he went to Tyree for help—his project had gained international acclaim and was making it into galleries, Kenny claimed he was a millionaire. Tyree refused.

Kenny was clearly upset here, “he turned his *back* on him man; how could he do that? After all Tim did for him...” He told us that he couldn’t stand Tyree, that he was always rude to Kenny when he came by, he didn’t want him to touch anything. It seems that, as a result of this fissure between Burke and Tyree, Kenny worked for Burke and not the whole Heidelberg Project. His gaze shifted again, this time to the yard next to Tim’s house.

“Aw man,” he began, moving over to the pallet fence in front of the yard, “he made *all* of this stuff, you see that rose?” He pointed to a large metal sculpture, which looked nothing like a rose. He told us all about the works in the yard, then looking across the street at the Heidelberg Project’s—now a private non-profit, ran by an endowment given by Tyree—main office in a white two-story, covered in graffitied numbers from “1 to 355,” Kenny later told us.

“Aw man,” he said, “it’s gonna be awesome—we’re gonna tear this down right here,” gesturing at the fence around Burke’s yard, “and they’re gonna have artists living up there,”

pointing at the second floor of the numbers house. “They’re gonna live up there and then make work out here.” He shifted focus again, talking about the summer events the Project put on, a concert series they had put on Facebook “they advertised it with all this free food, and they had *tables*” he began, gesturing from the end of the block all the way down to the numbers house, “*tables* of food, all these people had come, ready for this food, and then they were trying to *charge* for it—you can’t do people like that—so they all started leaving. They got stuck with *all* this food, man,” he finished with a laugh. He told us about how his daughter sold water in the summers to make some money, “I’ll buy a case of bottles for four or five dollars, then she’ll sell ‘em for a dollar each—make forty, forty-five dollars profit. 250,000 people a year come through here, that’s a lot of people.” His attention shifted again, this time to R. Kelly’s recent tour in Detroit. He mentioned the protestors there, picketing about Kelly’s sex-tape where he peed on an underage girl, “I don’t believe he did it, if you watch the video it’s clearly not him—but I do believe that Bill Cosby did those things, you don’t invite a woman up to your room at two am ‘just to chat.’ R.Kelly sold out the stadium for three nights!” He talked about how they were charging eighteen dollars a space, and there were 4,500 spaces. “That’s a lot of money,” he finished simply. Then he switched focus again, still on money, but now about how they were charging to get onto Belle Isle, a public park in the Detroit River that he used to enjoy going to—he was upset about the charges, “ten dollars for a sticker!” Kenny told us not to go to Belle Isle if we didn’t want to walk. His attention again shifted, now back to the space we were in.

He told us about how his house used to be right behind the Numbers House, but it too had burned down during the winter. His daughter Enya had just been born—she was two or four weeks old—he almost didn’t get her out of the fire. Luckily, his family survived, but now they didn’t have a place to go; like Burke he turned to Tyree for help, they had worked together for



years, but Tyree refused. Kenny got visibly angry, particularly about his newborn daughter “how can he just turn his back like that?” His whole family was out on the street, and Tyree had done nothing to help.

Kenny turned his back on the numbers house and began walking back towards the beginning of the street; he repeated himself, talking of ash and fire, of how busy the Project is. He showed us other pieces of art, “the neighbors think it’s all junk,” we were now looking at the remains of a torched house, its exposed foundation piled with found objects arranged in careful, humorous compositions. The neighbors saw it as trash, piles of garbage, a nuisance; but Kenny insisted it was art, that the project had made a difference in the community, brought safety and attention to a space that had been plagued by violence and neglect for a long time.

His gaze again returned to Tim’s old house. The first thing he was working on was the roof; Burke wanted to rip it off in order to add a second floor to the place. “Got to get it covered soon, it’s gonna snow.” He talked about the issues he expected with building the second floor, he knew he needed 2x10s, maybe even 3/4" plywood, “that’s a lot of weight,” he emphasized. He seemed excited about the work, he was looking forward to getting started. With all the talk of wood and building, he again returned to talking about his house, the place he was illegally squatting with his family; “if you saw the house before, you wouldn’t recognize it,” he had added rooms, taken out walls, built a big closet for his “lady,” whom he insisted needed the extra space.

“You might as well own it,” I said. Kenny simply nodded.

Two young white girls picking their way through the art carefully caught Kenny’s attention. He waved and said hello to them, “these are my brothers,” he introduced us. “I know they look whiter, but we’ve got other mothers.” The girls just vaguely laughed, not offering

much in return. "Where are you from?" Kenny asked. They mumbled a response, clearly uncomfortable with the situation—they giggled, it felt as if they thought the whole situation was a joke, as if Kenny was not to be taken seriously. He repeated to them some of the same information he had told to us, "250,000 people a year!" Then he told us about a car that was part of the Project, how it used to be covered in nickels and pennies but all had been slowly picked off—today it was festooned with stuffed animals. "Oh wow," said one of the girls, half under her breath, "I wish I could think of something like that." It felt like she addressed herself only to her friend, both of them consistently failed to meet Kenny's gaze, they rarely responded to his questions with anything more than monosyllabic phrases.

Kenny again mentioned the difficulty of his situation, the upkeep of the Project and how it cost him so much to live, to maintain everything. "If you could spare even a dollar..." he began, but it was lost on them—they stared, almost frightened, at each other; they shifted from foot to foot, unable to disengage but unwilling to participate. He kept on in his speech, and we left him to it. We walked closer to the record shop, taking in the humorous compositions, the jaunty shift of the roof, the mannequins patiently sitting inside. A cat darted underneath the building. We turned and walked down the street; a notice from the city, in bright yellow envelope, was stapled to one of the clocks. "Notice of repossession," it began, the city was notifying the Project that it had failed to pay property taxes and that within forty days, the empty lots which the art inhabited were to be cleared and returned to the city.

My thoughts returned to Kenny, did he know about the fate of the project? He seemed excited about the future work he was doing, about maintaining the area and talking to visitors. We went back towards the spot where we began, but the street was empty. The girls had left in their car, and Kenny was nowhere to be found.



*The Land Bank & Lili, Flint, 2018; Aaron Flint, 2016, & Clio, 2018*

Flint is unique for the presence of the Genesee County Land Bank, an entity (one of the first of its kind in the country) who manages and cares for tax-foreclosed properties. This organization works closely with the office of the city treasurer, who is responsible for foreclosure in these cities.<sup>118</sup> This public land program was founded with the intention of giving more control over the physical landscape of the city back to its residents and preventing some of the ills of absentee ownership and derelict properties that come with decay. The Genesee County Land Bank owns one in three “blighted” properties in Flint, a term which is here used to refer to homes which have been severely damaged, which might invite criminal activity or, as an individual I spoke with at the Land Bank said, are no longer saleable as homes. Blighted properties are, in the eyes of the Land Bank, too far gone to be salvageable.

I met with a woman on my second trip to Flint in 2018 who has worked at the Land Bank for many years; her name is Lili, and she currently manages the property database utilized by the entire staff of the Genesee County Land Bank. It is an aging piece of software that doesn’t meet all of the needs of her organization any longer, and so she is working on building a custom database from the ground up to manage the several thousand entries which the Bank has amassed over the years. I was introduced to Lili through a close friend and mentor, Dr. Wes Janz, who used to consult for the Land Bank. In 2007, Wes, using the principles he had learned from the Genesee County Land Bank, helped to found a separate and unaffiliated governmental group in Marion County, Indiana—the Indianapolis Land Bank. Before Lili worked on managing the database of the Genesee County Land Bank, she was responsible for leading and organizing all

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<sup>118</sup> Genesee County Land Bank, “What We Do,” The Land Bank, n.d., <http://www.thelandbank.org/whatwedo.asp>.

of the Bank's demolitions operations. When Lili began managing this team, there was only one demolition contractor the city worked with; by the time she left to manage data, however, there were between five and six demolition crews at any given time. The Land Bank manages an aggressive demolition program; Lili told me that in fiscal year 2017 alone, more than three-hundred blighted properties in the greater Flint area had been demolished.<sup>119</sup>

Lili is a Black woman in her mid-forties; she was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and through her years working for the Land Bank has become quite familiar with the problems facing the city. She knows well the rate of foreclosure, the average values of property, the distinct regions and neighborhoods of the city, the areas hit hardest by "blight" and the water crisis, and the members of the community who have become integral advocates for their neighborhoods, many of whom are opposed to the Land Bank's mission to demolish blighted homes. These advocates see the Bank's aggressive program to demolish property as something which often goes too far; entire blocks have been cleared out by these city-approved contractors. One place that the Land Bank was met with significant opposition was in their management of property in Carriage Town, a historic district of Flint that was once described as its shining "jewel." This neighborhood was once characterized by stately wooden homes from the Victorian era, some of which still remain; here and there, midcentury bungalows are visible, and some tarnished old homes with wonderful turrets, bay windows, and archways. Most places, today, there is empty space in this neighborhood.

"Few people in Flint can afford to buy these homes, let alone rehab them as the historical society requires; its simply too expensive to save these homes. And many of them have simply

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<sup>119</sup> Genesee County Land Bank, "Blight Management," The Land Bank, n.d., <http://www.thelandbank.org/blightmgmt.asp>.



been left to sit for so long that their internal structure is simply not safe any longer,” Lili told me as we sat for lunch—a group of four of us including herself, Wes, my good friend Noah, and myself—“If these people,” the community advocates, “had acted sooner, and cleared out the blighted homes, they might have been able to save many of the homes that are now gone.” She was very matter of fact: blight leads to more blight, it is a disease—and this is something which has been supported by academic research.<sup>120</sup> There is something psychological about decay in a community, something economic, something political, something racial; it finds its ways into certain neighborhoods and sets itself in certain ways that make it very difficult to cut out.

It seemed, as we sat for lunch in that café—a place that had, at one time, also belonged to the Land Bank—as if Lili were very right about these kinds of judgements; Flint was, in fact, doing better. The downtown was, as Wes described, more alive than he had seen it in years.

“Did you see Genesee Towers?” Lili asked Wes.

“Yeah!” Wes replied, recalling the property from his time working in Flint.

“That place was a problem for years,” Lili explained to us. The Towers had been mostly vacant since 1998 and had been condemned by a former circuit court judge in 2007; the building had suffered from a series of structural failures related to continued neglect and, potentially, poor construction quality; also potentially related was its trading between seven different owners over a period of less than ten years.<sup>121</sup> Lili described its implosion as part of the revitalization efforts the city had been taking on in its downtown to bring back urban life and a community feeling.

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<sup>120</sup> William Spelman, “Abandoned Buildings: Magnets for Crime?,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 21, no. 5 (1993): 481–95.

<sup>121</sup> Jeremy Allen, “A Roadmap to Genesee Towers’ Failures: Why Flint’s Tallest Building Is Being Imploded,” *M Live News*, November 24, 2013, [http://www.mlive.com/business/mid-michigan/index.ssf/2013/11/a\\_roadmap\\_to\\_genesee\\_towers\\_fa.html](http://www.mlive.com/business/mid-michigan/index.ssf/2013/11/a_roadmap_to_genesee_towers_fa.html).

Today, the former site of the Towers is a park, used sometimes, as Lili said, for yoga classes in the summer. Here also it seemed that Lili was making a direct connection: the removal of blight leads to ultimately positive consequences for the community.

I next asked her about the maintenance that the Land Bank does on vacant properties where houses once stood. Lili told me that what the Bank does to “maintain” these demolished properties is to seed them with grass and mow each and every last one of them. There are thousands of these vacant lands, tens of thousands of acres of grass; they have done this since the Land Bank began its demolition program, and it takes no small amount of the Bank’s annual budget to do so. It is a seemingly counterintuitive strategy: take vacant property and sit on it, expending thousands of labor-intensive hours keeping them clean and green. As the Bank acquires more and more property, Flint is slowly converted from dense community into semi-rural expanse:

“Entire blocks, the size of small rural farms, with one house right in the middle of them, a homestead,” Wes said, making the same connection.

In my mind, I asked Lili the question, “Surely there are better ways to cover and protect these grounds, less costly ways, less ecologically unsound ways?” But I did not ask it out loud. It was no longer her department, and she was enjoying the time reminiscing with Wes that day.

It is indeed likely that there are better ground-covers the Land Bank could use, less water-dependent, less gasoline-intensive than fields of grass. Yet against this, one must remember what is at stake if the Land Bank didn’t mow these years; one must remember that it is the weeds which grow in abandoned lots, plants that can reach as tall as seven- and ten-year-old children,



which pose a greater immediate danger to Flint residents than the cost of paying lawn care professionals to mow acres of grass.

As Lili explained to me, overgrown lots, while arguably beautiful, become the site of “drive-bys” where people feel comfortable throwing their garbage, often out the window of a moving car. This practice adds to a collection of waste that clings onto these plants, inviting more waste and debris, a slow cycle that eventually coats these shoulder-high grasses with other strange flora and fauna which blow curiously in the breeze at night. These plastic-covered landscapes become ideal spots for violent or exploitative types of crime including prostitution, rape, assault, and the stowage of bodies of homicide and drug-overdose victims. The phenomenon is surprisingly common; criminologist William Spelman describes the striking correlation between violent crime rates and the frequency of abandoned property with exacting detail: “blocks with unsecured [abandoned properties] had 3.2 times as many drug calls, 1.8 times as many theft calls, and over twice the number of violent calls as” non-abandoned blocks; what’s more, the presence of even one singular abandoned building was enough to increase this average trend significantly.<sup>122</sup>

These statistics, however, cover just the number of calls received; more crimes remain unreported here. These neighborhoods contain communities of people who are often unwilling to report such activity, fearing that they will be unfairly discriminated against by police. Still others see reporting crime as an ultimately futile cause; some of these neighborhoods are no longer patrolled by the police. Several residents I have spoken to describe making calls to the police that were not followed up with for a number of possible reasons, including the fact that

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<sup>122</sup> Spelman, “Adandoned Buildings,” 489.

not enough people lived in the area for the police to respond to the call, the crime was not considered pressing enough to deal with at that exact moment, or the local police department simply did not have enough police to go around. Whatever the actual case was, the result remains the same: residents are told that they are on their own, and so they decide that it is easier not to call.

More than two times as many calls regarding violent crime occur in areas with abandoned properties, and yet that is only the beginning of the actual problem, just an inkling of the true rate of crime in these areas.

This statistic, the number of calls about violent crime, coupled with disproportionate rates of body dumping in these areas, helps to form one of the most powerful master narratives that gets told about places like Flint: they are full of violence. Many people make the further assumption that these places are innately violent, *essentially* violent; this assumption is often extended to include the people who live there: “these people are essentially violent.”

This is simply not true; the people who live in these places do not have, as a fundamental component of their being and character, essentially violent tendencies. What *is* true is that these spaces are full of violence, it is something that is visible on their surface, it can be read daily in the news, or found prominently in a simple Google search of the city’s name. Spelman’s own article has shown us, however, that this is a *result*, not a fundamental condition. Violence is here a component of the built environment; a thing which is itself structured by racist and classist forces. Abandonment occurs in certain kinds of places, and what Spelman’s study does not discuss is how abandonment of the kind that makes up the rust belt is largely concentrated within and around communities of the working poor, and communities full of people of color. The space of the rust-belt city *becomes* characterized by violence through its structuring by these



forces, the bonds of capital, its rot and decay—yet even so Spelman reveals that *within* these communities, violence is not synonymous with human characteristics. What is interesting about the statistics which Spelman addresses is that the number of crimes reported is most accurately predicted by the presence of abandoned and unregulated buildings *alone*. No other statistic controls for this rate of crime better than abandonment. Even as Spelman fails to address the kinds of forces that create abandonment in places, he also shows us that we cannot attribute violence to people: he shows it empirically, rates of reported crimes cannot be correlated to race, nor ethnicity, nor class, nor gender, nor even the presence of other kinds of crime.<sup>123</sup> Violence is not a population-based thing, it is a *quality of space*. A quality of spaces that have been engineered for failure because of their segregation, because of racist and classist social forces which cause economic depression and divestment to closely correlate to communities of color and the working poor.

Violence is not *of* a place, it does not spring readily from a specific kind of people, nor does it come forth naturally from certain kinds of geographies. Violence is emergent; it is indicated most accurately by the qualities which exist *within a place*. What this further indicates is that violence is something that is *brought* to space precisely for the qualities that exist inside of it; violence is fluid, it navigates to these spaces in order to seek out abandonment—here there are unregulated spaces, properties choked by weeds, properties smelling of rot and decay *already*.

Violence finds these places, they are amenable to it—it is not invited in by certain races (race itself is a concept in need of redress), nor by certain classes, nor even by an imbalance of performed genders within a place (although male individuals are astronomically more likely to

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<sup>123</sup> Spelman, 490.

perform violent acts); it is abandonment, abandonment is what invites violence. This kind of pattern extends itself as well to criminal organizations; they too are bodies frequently formed outside of the victimized community, but they then enter into it “because no one is present to guard it or to regulate behavior.”<sup>124</sup> Abandonment brings violence.

This attractive quality of abandonment to violence is exemplified well by the frequency of dropped bodies. Most often, the victims and the perpetrator come from other places, other regions—within the same city or beyond it—that have distinctly different qualities, particularly socio-economic status.

The case of Imette Carmella St. Guillen, a murdered graduate student that studied at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, is particularly illustrative of this phenomenon. On the night of February 25, 2006, St. Guillen was out celebrating a birthday with some of her friends. It was the middle of the spring semester, and she had decided to stay out later than the rest of her party. Imette was last heard from leaving a bar (now closed) called The Falls in SoHo at four in the morning; she had just texted a friend that she was on her way home, safe. Her body was found the next morning in Brooklyn towards the end of Fountain Avenue, just where it turns into a small access road for the overpass there. She was wrapped in a quilt, her mouth covered with tape, her hands bound with bloody zip-ties.<sup>125</sup>

SoHo is a neighborhood characterized by wealth and its display at places such as The Falls, yet Fountain Avenue, and Brooklyn at large, is not. Fountain Avenue is a street with a

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<sup>124</sup> Jon M. Shane, *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police No. 64: Abandoned Buildings and Lots*, Problem-Specific Guides 64 (Albany, NY: Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, 2012), 8, [http://www.popcenter.org/problems/pdfs/abandoned\\_buildings\\_and\\_lots.pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/problems/pdfs/abandoned_buildings_and_lots.pdf).

<sup>125</sup> Al Baker, “Police Try to Trace Last Steps of a Student Found Slain,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2006, sec. New York / Region, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/28/nyregion/police-try-to-trace-last-steps-of-a-student-found-slain.html>.



former landfill. It has been home to industrial sites and social-housing developments.<sup>126</sup>

Brooklyn has not been, until recent waves of gentrification, a place of wealth. Legally, these places exist in the same city; yet it would be a mistake to call Fountain Avenue, Brooklyn, the same kind of place as 218 Lafayette Street, SoHo—the former storefront occupied by The Falls. This space is now taken up by the Osteria Morini, an upscale Italian restaurant where lunch starts at thirty dollars a plate.<sup>127</sup> The former site where St. Guillen's body was dropped, however, remains empty, a small white cross marking the spot where she was found.

It was one of the two male bouncers who worked at the SoHo bar that night who assaulted, brutally raped, and then killed Imette, dumping her body on Fountain Avenue. By car, the method by which Imette's murderer transported her body, Osteria Morini is twenty-five miles away from Fountain Avenue. At times, these two spots can be over an hour apart in New York traffic.

SoHo and Fountain Avenue cannot be called equivalent, they are two distinct geographical regions. SoHo is a place that you walk around in at night; you club there, you bar hop there, you get brunch there—Fountain Avenue is a place where you do not walk around at night. It is a place that people tell you they would not be caught dead in, even though there is a very high likelihood that they might indeed turn up dead exactly there: it is an ideal spot to drop a body compared to the wealth-saturated neighborhood that has its own, hip, character-filled name: South of Houston.

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<sup>126</sup> Baker.

<sup>127</sup> Osteria Morini, "Osteria Morini Menu," Osteria Morini, May 2018, <http://osteriamorini.com/soho-nyc/menus/>.

To Brooklyn, a neighborhood that has historically been home to the working poor, to the Black and immigrant populations of New York, the presence of Imette's body is quotidian. She is another victim, another statistic, another body to add to the count.

She is not from Brooklyn, she never *was* from Brooklyn. Even though at the time she was living and studying in New York, no one would tell you that she was a local Brooklynite.

Brooklyn and Manhattan are two distinct geographical regions characterized by very different kinds of social, economic, racial, and criminal statistics. What's more, they have two vastly different *physical landscapes*. Brooklyn still has unregulated properties, such as the tail end of Fountain Avenue where Imette St. Guillan's body was found, Manhattan does not. Brooklyn has the statistical indicator that told Spelman that violent crimes were over twice as likely to occur there, Manhattan does not. One is a place of wealth and its accumulation, the other is a place meant to hold the waste populations that are hired as tools in the name as capital, who rent their time out in increments as ways to make a living and survive. Brooklyn is a place built by and for victims. It is a place of victims. And here is where the true disparity occurs: even though Imette was brutally raped and murdered in downtown Manhattan, her body was found in Brooklyn, and so *her murder gets counted as a crime that happened in Brooklyn*.

Where is the origin of the master narratives of essentialized violence that get told about places like Flint? It is in this iniquity, this injustice here: Imette's body was added to the count of bodies, the count of *crimes* that occur in Brooklyn, yet she was not a victim *of* Brooklyn, she was not killed by a Brooklynite.

Both Brooklyn and Imette are victims of this spatial reality: the environment of places like Brooklyn and Flint and Gary and East St. Louis and Camden and Muncie *invites* crime.



Space creates these kinds of imbalances because it is built a certain way by a certain set of classist and racist forces. Space by itself is neutral; it must be impregnated with certain kinds of forces and barriers, it must be ordered in certain ways, before it can become the space ideal for abandonment, ideal for the dropping of bodies. Space is *made* amenable to violence by our own social dysfunctions. And so crime is *brought* to these places—sometimes from whole other states and geographical regions—and it is also structured into them: these are the waste regions of the world where we store away our industrial sites, our chemicals, our landfills, our urban poor, our workers. And it is because of this structure that every crime, every drug deal, every rape victim, every decaying body to get dropped in waste-strewn yards or the walls of a dilapidated home, is counted as “local” even when they are not. These lifeless bodies become the prime source of larger racist and classist stories about the people who live in these affected places: *they* are violent, *they* are dangerous, *they* are to be feared, not us.

This is a convenient tool, our society is structured in such a way that crime is displaced, it is disproportionately counted in these kinds of places: waste spaces, spaces of the living dead. And so we talk about them as places full of irredeemable people, spaces that are better left for dead: what better way to build a wall between people than to make it out of fear? What better way to hold down protests than to threaten the working poor daily with guns and bodies and rape and murder?

Here we must face the true contingency of these places and the futures they might yet bring about. Rust-belt cities *are* violent, they are dangerous, and they are this way because they have been structured in such a way so as to become like this. Rust-belt cities have the right quality to be made into violent spaces: deregulation. However, this also holds promise. It is the loss of regulation in which we can find hope. It is this loss which offers new possibilities for the

creation of a more equitable society, which suggests new ways to form better social couplings, because deregulation is what creates frictions and the epiphenomenal occurrences that come out of them: it is the loss of boundaries, walls and borders, itself. Deregulation *is* the falling-back of the city onto that earlier state of failure, the body without organs, and so it forces the innovation of new social modes of living, the creation of better linkages and couplings. And *yet*, simultaneously, this quality is the reason that Imette St. Guillan's body was found in Brooklyn and not in Manhattan; this quality is the reason that Timothy Thomas was gunned down in an alley in Over-the-Rhine and not in a café in downtown Cincinnati; this quality is the reason that Kenny doesn't have gas or heat or water in his house; this quality is the reason that Flint still has lead in its water.

Deregulation simultaneously opens up opportunities and it closes them down; it is something which creates an atmosphere in which "crime and disorderly conduct may escalate . . . gradually [eroding] the sense of caring and ownership for . . . property and [increasing] the risk of victimization," and something which creates the opportunities for people to start over, to make new beginnings.<sup>128</sup> It is a double-edged sword, and this is why things have become so contingent: they are balanced on the edge of a blade. It is now up to people, and the way that they take up action to form resistances, it is how they make new forces, how they move and blend and merge, that will determine the final outcome, the tipping of the balance.

Either way the blade tips, there will be death and pain and violence, because social change is never easy, it always takes a price. But there are some resistances that might get taken up which could end that violence. There are some possible futures which might emerge that

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<sup>128</sup> Shane, *Abandoned Buildings*, 8.



would tip the balance towards one end of the blade, slicing off the structural and spatial inequalities. Even so, there are still just as many other ways that tip the balance against these possibilities. The difference between these two futures, these two distinct realities, is paper-thin.

So we must face reality more sharply to find the kinds of forces that suggest which way the balance might be tipping. I

This is a reality of these places: they are victims, they are marginalized, they are full of people whose bodies (like Timothy Thomas') are thought of as kinds of weapons, and so it seems obvious to the outside, racist, classist observer that the crime which occurs in these places, crime that is in fact *brought* to them, is actually *from* them: these people are inherently, essentially, and irretrievably violent:

"Don't be there after dark."

I saw school-children walking home in East St. Louis, lunchboxes swinging side-to-side as they kicked a rock back and forth on a broken sidewalk, walking next to a chain-link fence marking the edge of a twenty-foot hole—a chasm in the city where an industrial building used to sit. Their faces were bright with laughter in the slowly setting sun.

"You'll be out of there by sunset, won't you?"

I would, but these children wouldn't.

And it is exactly because of the spatial quality of violence, it is exactly because of cases like Imette's, cases that represent the majority of the body dumps which occur, that the Genesee County Land Bank seeds and mows each and every last one of its yards, that they demolish and tear away each and every last one of its abandoned and unsaleable homes, expending hundreds of

thousands, perhaps *millions* of dollars on this campaign to manicure each and every last foreclosed property—they want to ensure that Flint does not become the Brooklyn into which the body of Imette St. Guillan is horrifically dumped. They want to ensure that Flint does not get disproportionately burdened with these kinds of statistics. They want to make it clear that Flint is not a place that you can just dump your trash. Flint is not an abandoned place.

And so they mow the yards. It all makes perfect sense. It all makes horrific, violent, sad sense.

It is a decision made out of a place of fear, a decision made with a defensive strategy in mind: we are not just people that you can *dump on*, we are not *garbage*. We are people with a community and with hopes and dreams and children who kick rocks back and forth on their way home from school—and they shouldn't have to be found in ditches, their mouths taped shut; they shouldn't have to be discovered face down in the Flint River, their lungs empty of water, their bodies full of lead.

This kind of thinking, the thinking that says “we have to mow every yard in Flint,” is the kind of thinking which develops quite naturally in cities like this.

These are the kinds of conversations that have to be had, the kinds of considerations that have to be made.

It is a matter of life and death.

This is what Flint, Michigan is like on just one level, in only one sense.

It is a place full of fear, a fear that has been mobilized as a way to defend the city against the kinds of evils that these violent crimes represent. And this *itself* is the potential of the rust-



belt city and the frictions that it produces: these resistances brought about in response to the friction of abandonment helped to form an entirely new social institution to deal with abandonment and decay knowing that one key reason that cities like Flint are disproportionately burdened with violent crimes is their spatial quality. This itself is the generative potential of frictions; it has potential to bring about real, substantive change, difference, but this must be set against the negative forces which stand directly beside, the destructive ones, the bodies still found in the walls of homes. Bodies put there by men like Gary-based serial killer Darren Deon Vann were; yet the stories of places like Flint does not just stop there.<sup>129</sup> Life is more complicated, there is more to these places than violence and death, even as that is a component of what they are.

I often tell people that Flint looks like a golf-course. Because of the mowing campaign which the Land Bank maintains, Flint has become a surreal landscape of rolling lawns and ancient trees. Here and there, the green is dotted with the odd home, most of which are worn, or clearly abandoned, or caving in—a few will have neat little gardens and clean siding, free of soot and debris, but they are few. Most homes have been cleared away.

I remember Wes telling me that all of the demolition was disorienting to him; after working here for a time, and in his numerous visits to the city since, he had developed a good memory of the various neighborhoods and streets. Wes could largely navigate by landmarks alone, understanding the relationships of these buildings and streets to each other. Yet when I returned to the city with him in the late fall of 2016, he was lost; we were searching for his friend

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<sup>129</sup> Ed Payne and Elliott McLaughlin, "Police: Indiana Man Could Be Serial Killer; Cases Could Go Back Decades," *CNN*, December 9, 2014, sec. United States, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/10/21/us/indiana-possible-serial-killer/index.html>.

Aaron, an anarchist who had been watching over a small block of the historic Carriage Town neighborhood, so that we could catch up with him.

We turned at a corner. “I think this is the street,” Wes said; there were no houses here. We turned several others—in many places, no street signs remain; many disappear, potentially for scrap—Wes was lost.

Wes doesn’t get lost in Flint. Wes knows Flint.

“I think we’re in the right spot,” he said.

There were no houses, only a small, clearly new strip mall with a blinking neon sign—a small Jimmy John’s sandwich shop.

Wes got out, his eyes set straight ahead, mouth slightly open. He looked up the street, he saw a large tree. He looked down the street. He turned around, posture open, shocked.

“They’re gone!” he said.

All five homes that had stood on this block were gone.

Wes wasn’t lost. He knew exactly where he was, but all the familiar landmarks had been taken away.

Over that lunch I had with Lili in 2018, I raised a question: what was the sociological impact of all of this destruction? Flint looks like a golf course, yet it used to be full of homes, homes that were full of memories for people. If Wes didn’t recognize the city, a city that he knew so well, what was the effect like for people that had lived there their whole lives? What was the effect like for people who might return, only to find their childhood home missing, replaced instead by a sprawling green meadow?



“It’s disorienting,” Wes had said; he returned to the city only periodically, each time catching up with people whom he has held close contact with over the years, retreading mostly the same grounds with every visit. The loss of these buildings, this physical landscape, was disorienting—it threw the world off axis, the order of things was tilted to a side; where were we? Was this still Flint?

Could we still call this the city Flint if it no longer acts, behaves, or appears like that city which existed perpetually in the mind of Wes?

What’s more, could we still call this city Flint if it were no longer the same as the city that existed inside the minds of the people who have actually called this city home for decades, half-centuries?

The city is irrevocably motile, and yet here is the city being erased? Is Flint still a city if instead of dense blocks we have green pastures dotted with little “homesteads” as Wes called them, semi-rural settlements?

The Land Bank arose as a way for the city to take control of its built environment, to ensure that it didn’t look like a place that you could be violent, a place that you could just dump your garbage in. Yet what it has done over the years, all of these demolitions, this push to “right-size” the city has transformed the landscape of Flint to such a degree that it no longer behaves the same. Without the physical landscape of the city to remind people of what the city once was, without the right kinds of objects to spark the right memories—memories that might be navigational or nostalgic or haunting or otherwise—could people even remember the city they once lived in? In cutting out the rot and blight and decay, have we also cut out an essential piece of ourselves? Have we cut out the bits that remind us where we came from, the things that tell us

that there was a past very different from the present we are living in; have we cut out the opportunity for Flint to remember itself as an integral community and thus likewise cut out the opportunity for Flint to renew those bonds, remake those couplings and start again as a city reborn? Without this fabric, or even the memory of the fabric of the city, fabric which itself brings back those memories of the past as so many friendly and haunting spirits that color our present, bring out certain qualities and characteristics that charge space in untold ways, it seems like the answer is no; Flint is no longer the city it once was—it is changed in kind.

And so what does this do to people? How do they experience this loss?

What is the sociological impact of demolition?

Wes recalled returning to his own childhood home, a rural farmstead, and not recognizing the house that he grew up in. When he arrived, he literally did not see the decaying structure that sat in front of him as the home of his memories; he thought, for a moment, that he was in the wrong place. And then it came, the shock of recognition. It was a full and blunt force, the feeling of loss; this is the place I grew up in? How could that be?

Lili punted, reiterating the importance of removing “blight” in inner-city neighborhoods; but then something else came, a second story.

She had ordered the demolition of her own childhood home. In her administration of the program to manage unsalvageable and potentially dangerous properties, she had ordered the demolition of her own childhood home.

And she briskly moved on; today, she said, the former site is a pocket park with a little free library in it. She told us, again, about how useful and positive blight removal is. She is so



committed to the belief that decay is a worse fate for the city than the total abolition of it that she didn't even bat an eye: I helped tear down the home that I grew up in.

She spoke later about her own son, soon to graduate college, and how he didn't want to live in Flint after he received his degree. Lili was a little disappointed at this. She herself had left the city for a time when she was old enough, but returned with a renewed commitment to the city and a desire to bring dignity and security to the place that had given rise to her as an individual. She both understood her son's wish and wanted him to have the same love of Flint that she did. To me, this seemed to relate directly to the question that I had raised: to her son, what was there in Flint for him—or, more precisely, what was there *left* in Flint for him? The city has been decimated, and that decimation has been written forever into the fabric of the city, entire districts of the city reduced to patches of green dotted with old trees, the odd house. Sure, the downtown is "coming back," but there is much more to the city than that—it sprawls, miles and miles of green, acres upon acres of old and abandoned homes, at least those that the Land Bank has yet to get their hands on.

We want to ensure that Flint does not become the Brooklyn into which the body of Imette St. Guillan is horrifically dumped. We want to ensure that Flint does not get disproportionately burdened with criminal statistics, stories of violence. We want to make it clear that Flint is not a place that you can just dump your trash: Flint is not an abandoned place.

And so we demolish and tear down and clear away and clean up and make it look at least decent: the best golf course in a hundred miles.

And yet in doing so we forever write it into the fabric of the city: Flint *is* an abandoned place, look at how empty it is, there's nothing left here. Sure there are people who hang out, walk

around in the downtown, but beyond that the place can at times seem like a ghost town, wind whistling over the close cropped lawns, the ancient trees overhead.

Flint feels like a tomb, perhaps a mass-grave.

The loss of memory, the decentering of the world axis, the killing of pain—no more childhood homes, no more children left at all, those that can have gone away. Psychologically, it seems as if the city of Flint is stuck in denial; we are not an abandoned place, look: there is yoga in the park left behind from the footprint of the once tallest tower in Genesee County, a tower that once held thousands of workers every day, but there are thirty maybe forty mats, a great turnout. We are not an abandoned place. Look: a pocket park with a little free library where a few people come to walk their dogs every now and then. A family of six used to live there.

“It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: ‘you see, here there used to be . . . ,’ but it can no longer be seen,” it has been wiped away.<sup>130</sup>

But for those forty people in the park, those three or four dog-walkers, is there a Flint? Is there a community? Is there a new body here coupling itself together along lines of force described by desire? Or is this community, collectively, still coping with this loss, loss at an urban scale? This also is the city: a place of loss; the loss of industry, the loss of jobs, the loss of population, the loss of taxes, the loss of police, the loss of physical infrastructure, the loss of homes, the loss of memories. Lili too lost things; she has lost her parents, her trust in the water and the government that brought it to her (“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to drink the water again,” she said, eyes serious, looking down at a set of crumbs to the side of her plate); she lost

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<sup>130</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.



her childhood home—and she made that call, it was important to her, it was a choice that she believed would help to heal the city.

There are two distinct sides to this axis: we need to right-size the city, we need to clear away broken homes and derelict businesses, we need to mow every lawn in Flint, because these things pose real dangers. Yet in this push to do so, what might we overlook? These initiatives seem only to be looking forward, eyes set on a future goal; is there also room to look back, to see loss, to understand it better, to cope and hold onto the roots of what made this place a community, a city. Demolition on this kind of scale changes the nature of the city not only physically, it has untold psychological, sociological effects. This practice rewrites the city, pressing more permanently into the mind, into one's skin "there is loss here," "people *once* lived here," and they have moved on; Flint is no longer the same community.

It is into this complex landscape—the rolling green pastures, the loss, the violence, the potential—that one must picture also Aaron, the anarchist. Within this pseudo golf course, one must place a set of five boarded-up Victorian homes, covered in Halloween decorations and graffiti-covered signs, and a singular man with laminated court orders pinned to his car and his house.<sup>131</sup>

Aaron has become a strange advocate for Flint; he is extremely familiar with the law and understands very precisely his own rights. He knows when and how he can deny the presence of police on his land, the finer points of property law, the extent of historic district protections given to Carriage Town, the legality of searches, what constitutes reasonable suspicion, how to request and receive court orders including ones that halted the demolition of homes in the area several

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<sup>131</sup> Janz, "This Is Flint."

time, and his own rights relative to the search and seizure of his property. He admits that he grows medicinal marijuana illegally on his land, but still knows where and when the police have overstepped the limits of the law to such a degree that he was not arrested once (as far as I am aware) during his watch over those five Victorian homes.

During his time living on this block, he developed a series of tactics for mitigating the spatial effects of abandonment relative to crime and for dealing with the lack of police presence in the area while also maintaining the abandoned homes around him.

Flint is Aaron, living . . . in the Carriage Town Historic District, next to . . . abandoned [houses] notable for the hand-painted signs hammered to [their] side: "HUMAN SACRIFICES NEEDED / INQUIRE INSIDE"

I've photographed the signs, the house, and a backyard adorned with plastic skulls wrapped in barbed wire and plastic skeletons swinging from tall posts. During one snow-swept stop, I heard a bleating goat. Others warned me about the man who lived next to the house, and seemed to be the author of the scary signs: "He took after somebody with a chain saw."

On one of my visits, he's there, Aaron. We talk. I've got questions, he's got answers. Skulls and skeletons? They're gifts, he's a Halloween baby. Signs? He put them up to discourage others from messing with the house or with him or his stuff. It worked. Other tactics? Using a searchlight to harass hookers, hustlers, meth users and sellers. Gorilla-gluing a nearby public telephone to stop deals. Filing lawsuits against the City and the hospital nearby for dereliction of responsibility. Expanding into the backyards to the north and south. Chain saw? Sure, he did walk, not run, after city officials while holding a chain saw, but it wasn't turned on and was facing backwards. "Who could possibly be threatened?" Later, when I mentioned Aaron at the Land Bank, I'm told that they believe he is a long-term squatter. They can't find any record of his legal claim to the house and he's not provided them with one. Aaron disputes that. Whatever the truth, it's his house to the extent that no one wants it, no one is paying attention, and no one wants to mess with him.<sup>132</sup>

Aaron and his tactics stand as a counterpoint to those that we have seen deployed by Lili and the Land Bank at large: Aaron is an individual who "illegally" occupies homes that have been

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<sup>132</sup> Janz.



abandoned alongside his own home in order to secure them; the Land Bank is an institution organizing itself as an administrative force upon the land. Each approach here adopts distinct perspectives: the Land Bank knows about the state of the homes under its control by sending out emissaries with clipboards who, as Lili told me, conduct “dashboard surveys” driving to each owned property to check off a series of descriptors about them. Aaron knows about the condition of the homes around him physically. He enters into them, he feels them, he exists alongside them; they are not mute buildings to him. One perspective is a view from afar, the other is the view from up close. It seems that it is this distinction in proximity, the physical closeness of these individuals to the built environment that they are caretaking, which generates the differences between them. Both Aaron and Lili are dedicated to the integrity of Flint, to its safety and its needs, to its built environment and its people, and yet their approaches could not be more different.

It seems like Aaron’s tactics are the antidote to the sociological pain, the loss and disorientation, that the Land Bank’s approach creates. He too is a kind of hero. Instead of clear-cutting, Aaron asks for responsible management based on local commitment and individual initiative: let those who remain care for, or at least manage and watch, the homes around them. He asks us to respect history, to see the world as not merely full of disease, not as a place full of waste, but as a landscape in transition, as something on its way to another state. It is a kind of death, one which brings dignity to human projects: the memorial. This house here is original to the district, it has stood for over a hundred years, it has been lived in, it has held families, even as it now moves towards ruin: look at it, it *was*. Aaron asks us to confront devastation in a way that is very unlike the Land Bank’s confrontation; unlike the Bank, Aaron does not cover over the loss, he does not hide the home under a blanket of green grass. Aaron puts the home on display,

he draws attention to it, he paints it, puts Halloween decorations on it, he points search lights at it—and this simultaneously achieves protecting it (a visible thing is a regulated thing, as Foucault has shown us) and confronting, coping with, the loss which this community has undergone.<sup>133</sup>

Aaron preserves the landmark, maintains memory (the homes are memorials), allows for mourning, a process of dying that is more akin to natural processes than it is to waste processes like those undertaken by the Land Bank (those unused materials do not die, but are instead taken elsewhere, hidden, prevented from dying). What the greenness, the contiguity of the lawns which the Land Bank seeds with the lawns of those pristine homes which it eventually hooks up to suggests is a certain vision of the perfect home, the perfect community: the picket fence, the well-kept lawn, the expanse of a yard. Here death does not occur but is displaced in the name of perfection, and this is both a way to prevent violence and constantly put off that moment of coping, the facing-up-to the facts that haunt Flint today: Flint is not that community of perfection that it wants to look like, and it is this image of perfection which is itself controlling and hegemonic in origin. This image requires a certain *kind* of family, a certain amount of money, a stability of income and social networks that simply are not afforded to many residents who still reside in Flint.

Aaron's approach, on the other hand, goes directly against this image: death *does* occur here, it has occurred here, and we must cope with that if we are to remain a community, and this does not have to run counter to our desire for safety—death doesn't have to be dangerous, decay isn't something horrific to be pushed to the side, "death and deterioration are not some

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<sup>133</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 195–230.



perversion of the logic of life, they are lived with routinely and actively.”<sup>134</sup> This “living with” death does not propose violence by nature of its differentiation from the image of the city around it, the city which the Land Bank desires—it is abandonment which does that. When the human element is removed from the land, that is when violence is attracted, that is when it can emerge; Aaron’s living-with is distinct in that the human element is preserved: there is a caretaker, the built environment is not left to chance, but carefully watched over. Unlike the Land Bank’s passive administration, Aaron’s approach is highly active and engaged: it is a fight—and the result is visually and psychologically confrontational in a way that is highly distinct from the aesthetics of abandonment and mere ruin, Aaron *edits* decay, he inhabits it with a new kind of aesthetic, what might be called “‘the apocalyptic sublime’ . . . the aesthetics of precarity that, in architectural form, manifests as [deterioration].”<sup>135</sup>

And this prevents disorientation and the assaulting reminder and feeling of loss that it brings. When Wes discovered that Aaron and his row of homes, the ones that he had fought so hard to preserve, had been replaced by a shiny new strip mall, the loss shocked him, it knocked the world sideways; the air left his lungs, a blow to the stomach. Aaron had been a friend that Wes had grown to know quite well. He returned to Flint to talk with him for nearly a decade. And here instead there was the exact opposite of Aaron, a shiny new strip mall, new patches of green grass, the image of perfection. This is loss. Here had been a man who was dedicate, in a radical way to the preservation of the built environment, to Flint as a community, as a city; here was a man who operated so differently from everyone else, and he had been wiped out without a trace.

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<sup>134</sup> Cairns and Jacobs, *Buildings Must Die*, 5.

<sup>135</sup> Cairns and Jacobs, 5.

For some time, Wes did not know what had happened to Aaron. He simply vanished.

Many people in the rust belt simply vanish like this. It is another reality of these kinds of places: they disappear individuals living at the margins at an astonishing rate.

Later, we learned that the homes had been bought off of Aaron after they had been delisted from the historic register of Carriage Town. This delisting had been part of a larger movement pushed by a committee of “local property owners” including the “Hurley Medical Center, Kettering University and the Genesee County Land Bank.”<sup>136</sup> Both Hurly and Kettering bought the properties they owned in Carriage Town as investments, they were prospectors, each with the intent of expanding their campuses or their profits by buying into a district that had once been described as a “jewel” of Flint.<sup>137</sup> This prospecting had been strongly opposed by Aaron himself, whose home was in the affected area; the measure sought to delist ten entire blocks, formally redrawing the boundary of the district to neatly cut out Aaron, to cut out dissent.

These owners, Kettering and Hurley, are not “owners” in the same way that Aaron is; they are not individuals committed to the place and the people they live with and among—something demonstrated by Aaron’s own ability to suspend this measure to delist the area for a time, and to attain orders to halt the demolition of his block of homes (to no avail, when he arrived, signed paper in hand from the judge, the bulldozer had already torn into everything)—Hurley and Kettering are absentee owners, organizations that view the property from a distance. To them, the house exists as a nondescript place, a deed, a value. Houses are things to be bought and owned in the eyes of the investor, traded if it is found to be necessary and politically

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<sup>136</sup> Ron Fonger, “Shrink Flint’s Historic Carriage Town? New Report Suggests Removing 10 Blocks,” *M Live News*, November 14, 2014, [http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/11/shrink\\_flints\\_historic\\_carriag.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/11/shrink_flints_historic_carriag.html).

<sup>137</sup> Fonger.



lucrative; but for the investor, these homes are not truly homes to in the sense that Hurley and Kettering do not seem to recognize that these buildings help to form the substratum of a community, that there are still people who rely on these homes not only as dwellings, but as markers, as points of orientation to hold onto life in a certain way, to cope with the world and the way it has become. And this is Aaron's view, a view very different from Hurley's, from Kettering's; he views this land and the objects that populate it from a pedestrian perspective: it is contiguous with his horizon, it is an extension of himself, it is filled up with his life experience and his possessions, it connects him to other people and places—even as it decays and dies—and this is why he fights for it: because the loss of this fabric has a direct impact on the community he lives within.

Even this notion which has been used here is too limiting for the view which Aaron takes, "property." Property is useless in places like Flint as a concept; ownership becomes more like Aaron's ownership, the people who care remain, and so they should be allowed *to* care for the places around them. Property is not just a thing to own for Aaron, it is a thing that holds use value well beyond his own needs: it can, if needed, house others, it can guide people, it can allow people to cope, to remember, to come to terms with the fundamentally changed nature of the city. This land Aaron has, these homes he defended, they are not meant only for him, it is not "property" like that, it just so happens that he is the last one left among them. And so he "owns" them all, much like Kenny owns his own home up in Detroit. It is a model of living that could only be possible in places like Flint, like Detroit; so many boundaries have been lost here, and so places like the Land Bank and places like Aaron's block can exist side by side, producing frictions.

There is something about Aaron that makes him an ideal citizen. He has committed himself fully to the place in which he lives. He cares for its integrity. He fully understands his rights and the extent of the law, and he holds people and institutions accountable for their promises and their actions. He is open and honest about his ideas and beliefs. He uses his resources in creative and unexpected ways, and he maintains good relationships with those that seek to have ones with him. Yet he does all of this in a way which seems to fall far beyond our current social system; he seems to be just one step beyond the limits of capital—and it is here that we might find hope. There are other ways to live not bounded by the limits of what we have come to know as “life” under capital. There are ways that offer liberation alongside safety and beauty and loss and coping: these things, aesthetic value, mourning over loss, and healing from it, can all exist together, they are not dialectically opposed concepts. Nevertheless, in order to reach these possibilities, we must first have loss, first produce frictions, first have death. Freedom is not a painless and easy thing that can be attained without loss; it is sacrificial and world-shattering, a thing that must be fought for and then renewed again and again—and Aaron does this. Or at least, he *did* that.

His homes have been wiped away.

The tactics he used to get there have likewise been wiped away, living on only in the paragraphs of Wes’s article.

For a time, it was entirely possible that Aaron was dead; that he might be lying face down in the Flint river, lungs empty of water, body full of lead.

Forces generate, and they kill. The two are not separate, they exist side by side.

And yet, in the winter of 2017, Wes received an email.



It was Aaron. Aaron had found Wes's article, and could he please change it so that he wasn't described as a squatter? Aaron told Wes that he did have the deed, it was just in his ex-girlfriend's name. He was not a squatter, at least not in one of those homes, though he did admit that he had squatted for years in the others. And so what? No one else was going to watch them, protect them. Not even the police.

Wes did change the article. He told me how he couldn't believe he had taken the land bank at their word, "of course they would say that." Of course they would call Aaron a squatter. What a convenient truth, what an easy way to delegitimize his own approach to living.

Wes also shot back another email asking what had happened, where Aaron was now, if we could meet up with him. Aaron agreed, he had bought a place just north of Flint in a town called Clio.

I met Wes in Flint at a café downtown that morning. It was a third-wave coffee shop, nice, a little pricey.<sup>138</sup> It was late winter and a snowstorm from the previous night had coated Flint in a thin, white veil of snow; the air was crisp, the sky a pale blue, the clouds flat and grayish, and the sun rose, a thin white disc. We spent the day catching up with old friends Wes had made, Lili, Brian (a local cop who himself wrote a set of piercing reflections about lived experiences in Flint, and we drove around town, returning to the spot where the five Victorian homes had once stood in Carriage Town.<sup>139</sup>

When we left Flint to meet Aaron, the sun was lower in the sky, taking on a goldish hue that cast stark shadows, black and white. Wes's truck quietly hummed as we got on the highway

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<sup>138</sup> Timothy J. Castle, "The Future of Specialty Coffee and the Next Wave," *Magazine*, Coffee Talk, January 23, 2016, <http://coffeetalk.com/ctmagazine/01-2016/21518/>.

<sup>139</sup> Brian Willingham, *The Soul of a Black Cop* (Flint, MI: Willingham Enterprises, 2006).

to take us the fourteen miles north to Clio. Outside, everything was normal; cars came and went, billboards passed at regular intervals, industrial buildings stood close the road. I remember the color beige; everything was beige in my memory, even the white snow. The world moved at a normal pace, it did not care that we had found Aaron again.

We left the highway for Clio Road, a street that cuts through rural areas towards the heart of this small town. We turned off the main road soon after, trundling along a bumpy gravel road still choked at the sides by snow.

“There’s Aaron!” Wes called. The property was easy to spot.

It was an old, brick Victorian farmhouse notable for the large gap in its front façade covered over by a limp blue tarp and bungee cords. The pitch of the roof was lined with wonderful finials and carved wooden details, white paint peeling away at the edges, several pieces either cracked or entirely missing. The house was a mess. And so, naturally, it was Aaron’s.

In the front yard, belongings were strewn about chaotically. The main driveway was stuffed to the gills; towards the back there appeared to be a boat on a trailer underneath a flapping gray tarp. A fridge, ratchet-strapped to a dolly, sat beside that. In front of the boat, just at the edge of the driveway, was a deep blue SUV. A laminated court order was jammed onto the rear passenger window. Just off to the left of the driveway was a half-sized blue shipping container, door slightly ajar. In between these large objects sat a huge array of other small objects, a microwave, a beaten-up old stool holding what appeared to be five gallon-sized Tupperware boxes of pickled vegetables (particularly carrots), a dresser, a filing cabinet, milk-crates, cardboard boxes—the driveway was packed absolutely full of the paraphernalia of



Aaron's life, the house apparently empty. An old tree just by the driveway held a plastic shrunken head crowned by barbed wire.

And there, in the midst of it all, was Aaron.

Aaron is a young man easily in his early thirties. On that bitterly cold day he wore baggy gray sweatpants marked by various stains terminating into a giant pair of black boots with no laces, tongues flopping humorously forward sides flared out. Underneath were thick woolen socks. He sported a thick knitted sweater with an open flannel shirt; his hands were covered in knit fingerless gloves; and a large black beany crowned his head. His face was lined with young wrinkles, particularly around his bright eyes, and a full, unkempt black beard protruded around a set of rather thin pale lips. He waved wildly as we pulled up, his hands rolling what appeared to be a blunt as Wes parked his truck just to the side of the road beside the overstuffed driveway.

"Hey man!" Wes called, the two exchanging a handshake, a hug, arms wrapping around to pat the back, one, two, three times. Wes easily stood above Aaron, a man of roughly five-foot-eight or -ten.

"What's up?" Aaron returned, his hands returning to the joint. He shook my hand as well, and my friend Noah's.

"So what happened, I heard you were a sell-out?!" Wes joked openly, referencing the purchase of Aaron's home.

Aaron laughed, recognizing the irony of it all. His hand fished in his pocket, pulling out a lighter, he lit the rolled joint, drawing deeply from the red tip of the paper.

“Well,” he began, trading hands to put away his lighter and flick ash off his blunt, “I sold the property to Kettering; they offered me \$33,000 for it.”

“Oh,” Wes responded, “that’s a lot.”

“It was, yeah.”

“Why did you take it?”

“The water crisis man,” Aaron said, eyes squinting as he drew again, a puff of pungent smoke. “It took my dog. She had gotten real sick, and I didn’t know what to do. She ended up dying in my arms, it really killed me. . .” He paused, left arm crossing across his chest to support the blunt-wielding hand. He looked distant.

“I’m sorry man, that must’ve been awful,” Wes replied in the silence.

Aaron simply nodded. “She was the canary in the coal mine for me, I started thinking about what the water might be doing to my own health. Then Kettering came knocking at my door and offered me the \$33,000; I didn’t even think twice about it, I just took it. It was honestly more than the house was worth too, but they wanted to build that strip mall so I had the upper hand. I didn’t want to die like my dog.”

Wes nodded this time, taking it all in.

“I took that as my sign to get the hell out; I started watching some tax sales and when I found this place, I bid on it, won it for \$3,000.”

Wes and Aaron talked like this for awhile, Wes providing playful jabs and Aaron laughing at times, always pulling from that rolled paper joint. We learned that the blue shipping



container was currently Aaron's home, he had had it shipped up here while he worked on fixing the garage; that was where he planned to move next.

"If you put the gas heater right up against the metal, the whole container radiates warmth, it actually works really well," Aaron said in defense.

Aaron's mother was coming up in a couple months, and he wanted to fix up the rear part of the house, basically an enclosed porch, for her to stay. He was going to move into the old garage of the house.

As Wes asked about the covered boat, Aaron told us that it was a recent purchase and he intended to use in the future. He had filed suit against Hurley and Kettering for demolishing the five homes that he had received a court order for ensuring their protection. "With all five homes, that's 1.7 million dollars baby," Aaron said, smiling. He planned on using the boat to go north when he won the case. He wanted to buy an island in the middle of a lake up in Canada and retreat to it, probably start a marijuana farm.

He talked in grandiose terms about his move; he wanted to buy a rare amphibious vehicle (he already had one lined up from California) so he could just drive from the island to shore whenever he needed things. He hinted that he might use the vehicle to transport hash ("it packs better") as well. He wanted to build a greenhouse dome from a sci-fi sounding tech: metal panels engineered to be ultra-thin and totally transparent; indestructible glass. He already knew a guy he could buy an island from. He had taken the boat up to scout out the area. It all sounded so improbable, yet also so possible: this was no ordinary man.

Wes pressed him a little on this escapism, "I thought you once said that you'd never leave Flint?"

“I did, yeah,” but he really didn’t elaborate much on the whole thing, the anecdote about his dog’s death still felt like a fresh wound.

Wes and Aaron chatted some more, Wes pressing for more info, Aaron returning half-preposterous, half-believable stories. He talked about his neighbors whom he had gotten along with really well in the beginning, before he found out that one was in the business of trading weed at an industrial scale and had wanted nothing to do with the aggressive business he had developed. Since then that neighbor, who had flown a white-nationalist organization’s flag in his yard, had packed up and left mysteriously—perhaps afraid that Aaron would share the information with police. The neighbor on the other side from him was good friends with this drug-dealing neighbor and had since then given Aaron nothing but hell; he would call the police on Aaron frequently, often for noise complaints or minor infractions. The worst was a call in which he had claimed that Aaron was abusing his last surviving dog, Spoiled Brat. The police, however, after talking with Aaron and learning that the dog was fourteen years old refused to take action—“if she’s made it this long you must be doing something right,” they said to him. The court order attached to the side of his SUV was in fact an order attesting to Aaron’s fitness to care for Spoiled Brat, the dog’s good health, and an advisement that the dog should not be taken away; it was notarized, signed, and sported the appropriate seal; it was legit.

After some other talking, Wes said goodbye to Aaron, exchanging the same handshake/hug as before.

Aaron shook my and Noah’s hands: “Nice to meet you!”



We returned to the truck, turning around, and driving off. Aaron was busy rolling a new blunt, he mixed his weed with equal part loose tobacco leaves, but he still waved back to Wes' two horn beeps.

"I could've talked for hours, but it was freezing," Wes said. It was, and yet Aaron didn't seem cold at all.

Reflecting on that interaction, it seems like all the power has been taken away from Aaron. Here, in Clio, he has a limited range, an aggressive neighbor, police who actually come to the area he lives. Even as Aaron is extremely well equipped to handle these kinds of harassment, it is still there, a thorn in his side, a reminder that he doesn't belong. It seems that the frictions that were produced in Flint proved too great for even this man, a man who had held so much promise.

His dog had been poisoned by the land itself, dying in his arms. This was a visceral reminder that Flint is not the same kind of community that it once was, it has been changed in kind. Flint, despite Aaron's intense work, his devotion, his legal fights, his effective tactics, is still a place of loss, of violence, of death—and that takes its toll on the body. Being in a constant state of resistance, fighting back, is exhausting and it took the death of his dog—no small thing in Aaron's view—to finally bring him out of that fervor, to scare him, to remind him that his devotion to Flint as a place might in fact just kill him, it was only a matter of time.

This shocked Aaron, it scared him, it too threw his world off balance. And so he found the first opportunity out and took it. And I do not blame him for that; as much potential as his line of flight held, it held just as much danger and pain and death. It could have collapsed at any

moment, taking him with it, and so he chose to flee. The critique that he brought to Flint is now gone, replaced by smooth, homogeneous lawns.

And I wonder what legacy other people like Aaron might have, whether or not they will be remembered once the revolution has taken its course, whether they will be heralded as its harbinger. I doubt it. These people can be so easily wiped out, erased, made to disappear just as Aaron was with a threat to his life and a bribe of \$33,000 dollars. He was put into a weakened state, a state where he has less power to critique, yet a state that appears to be no less contingent than the one he was in when he lived in Flint. He remains in danger, threatened now by his very neighbors.

“I think that Aaron is, in a radical way, the model citizen; yet I still can’t imagine having him as my neighbor,” Wes said, the truck again ascending towards the highway, returning us to Flint.

“Yeah,” I said, my eyes pointed towards the horizon and the glowing disk that now approached it. Long shadows stretched across the highway, emptier now than it was before.

I wonder how long it will be until Aaron will once again fall off the map, how long until the house he now lives in is likewise demolished. People like him, people whose very existence threatens the structure of society itself by challenging its image of perfect harmony, its striking un-criticality, are so vulnerable. They have no legal rights here, because they operate at times beyond them; the deck is stacked so heavily against them.

That night, I went to a bar with Noah for dinner; it was brimming with young people, the parking lot across the street surprisingly full.



How long until places like Flint are brought back into the fold? How long until the forces that failed here, that turned Flint into a poisonous landscape of waste and loss and abandonment and violence, return to quiet the masses and cover over the rot that still eats so readily at our freedoms elsewhere? How long until Flint it only lawn?

Voices like Aaron's, voices that bring critique, are being snuffed out right and left. I have lost track of the number of people I have met that have since disappeared.

It is part of the reality that makes up these places.

*Packard, Detroit, 2016 – 2018; Booker T. Washington Cemetery, Centerville, 2016 & 2018*

The clearness of the day was beginning to give way to clouds and gray skies as we came upon the ruins of the Packard plant. The long, low blocks of brick-faced, concrete buildings—spotted with graffiti and the remains of once proud green windows—had a hollowness to them. In the spotty light of the setting winter sun, the volume of the buildings seemed to be immensely greater than normal. Dormant trees grew out of the sidewalks, dead grasses emerged between, within, around, and on top of the buildings. From a distance, the building appeared to slumber; pipes, dangling from the caved-in portions of the complex, blew calmly in the growing winter wind—a strangely serene set of industrial wind-chimes.

As we got closer to the buildings, the image of sleep was disrupted by the presence of numerous white vans, “security” emblazoned on their sides. They hummed, engines idling between the ruins, interrupting the calmness of the decay. Like pests, flitting between the nooks and crannies of its host, they trundled about—somehow ensuring an increased “safety.” I recalled my trip to the plant a year and a half prior, the vans flocked suspiciously around a courtyard of the buildings. Between them ran white men, some in camouflage, others with bandanas over their mouths, still others with backwards baseball caps, all equipped with rifles and pistols—realistic replicas of deadly weapons designed to shoot air-propelled rounds instead of metallic projectiles. Each man had a green band around their right bicep, an insignia belonging to the development corporation responsible for the “redevelopment” of the plant on them.

Shouts echoed in the halls of the former production lines, shots rang out from the places where auto-workers had been exposed to dangerous chemicals, cries of pain and peals of



laughter spread like thick oil across the cracked and pitted concrete. The abyss of each window took on a more sinister character, the graffiti and rust felt rougher, slabs and spans of suspended concrete—hanging by wires and filaments from the body of the deceased—became momentarily the victims of an imaginary war rather than economic divestment and failure. “Military fetishists,” was quietly passed around on the lips of my classmates as we too stood in the shadow of the plant, watching grown adult men live out their suppressed and overtly violent dreams of rampage in the form of toy guns and borrowed backdrop of libidinal ruin.

Later we learned that each of these men had paid hundreds of dollars, filed legal waivers of liability, and lobbied the developers of the plant itself to have the pleasure of violating the serene quietude of the decaying buildings with their guns, to penetrate into the deepest recesses of this space—pregnant with stories of production and pride, with the broken promise of better lives—and violently desubliminate their unconsciousness, writing over the histories of the plant with their own altered militaristic narrative.

Now, in place of white men, the white vans swarmed around a different kind of weapon. Dump trucks and excavators thronged the same courtyard that had been the site of the fetishists pretend war, pulling off bits of rubble and broken expanses of concrete as they tore into the fabric of the plant itself. The violence of the white man was now exercised on the buildings themselves, erasing the decay, covering over the ruin in search of a new history, a narrative of “possibility” and “economic opportunity.” Piles of bricks and rubble had begun to be neatly stacked in the yards, signs bearing the message “Packard Brewing, coming soon,” filled the windows of the former administration building. The buildings were being awoken.

Turning the corner, away from the security and the working beasts, the buildings stretched away—Packard sprawls out, over a mile long. At the end of the line of former

manufacturing halls, between the columns of the nearly totally collapsed southwestern-most building, we could see the skeletons of tall oaks, the crowns of headstones, the steeple of a church. In this forced perspective, the cemetery inhabited the floors and windows of this collapsed building. The oaks and the headstones fit neatly on top of the concrete, now spilling over the edge towards its neighbor. As we turned again, the cemetery and plant separated, making the excavators and vans visible again—the steeple slid out from between the frame of the columns.

Something is happening at Packard, much like the celebrated success of the downtown redevelopment, the husk of the plant is being repurposed for new audiences. The juxtaposition of the cemetery and the collapsed plant, oscillating in and out of view with each other, implicated the multiple deaths of the plant itself—as a manufacturing facility, as a community anchor, as a symbol of power, as a center of capital; now it was dying again, no longer would it be Packard the memorial, Packard the memory, Packard the ruin, Packard the tourist attraction—but neither would it be returned to a place of community pride.

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Booker T. Washington Cemetery sits along a wooded road, curving slightly as it approaches the entrance. Two small, unobtrusive green signs next to a young evergreen; it is possible to drive completely by these signs that mark the entrance—a gravel drive that doubles as a driveway for an adjacent white house—without ever seeing them. Everything dissolves into a blur of green.

The first time I visited this place it was late fall, a clear and windless day where the sun appeared overhead as a muted and greasy white orb. I was with a class of fellow students in two university marked, white vans that pulled off the road together, there at the entrance of the



cemetery. A small, clean, and well-kept plot of maybe twenty-five graves sits here at the front, clearly visible from the road. Each grave is marked by a flat stone, a small cluster of plastic flowers; a white concrete basket sits roughly in the middle, empty. This is not the cemetery we came to see.

Gravel crunching under tires, we pulled farther down the road, just entering a grove of old trees, crowns rising high above, underbrush marked by scrubby bushes and fallen leaves from autumns past. A yellow chain meets us, strung from tree trunk to tree trunk. The white house sits close to the gravel drive, its black windows seeming to loom outwards as eyes, even in the middle of the day. A brick chimney emits no smoke, sun-bleached children's toys sit just to the back, patches of fallen leaves beginning to cover them over. A "no trespassing" sign swings from the chain, caught in the breeze stirred up by our vans. The engines shut off and it is quiet.

I hear no birds in this place.

No sign is there to tell you that the cemetery continues beyond this small plot of graves by the main road; to the unsuspecting visitor, it seems that this chain simply demarcates the private back yard of the white house that sits almost too closely to the drive. A lump is caught in my throat, it really feels like I am trespassing; I do not belong here.

The drivers' doors open, closely followed by the ones in the rear. As we walk, a group of maybe twelve, gaps in the brush to the side reveal a large clearing behind the trees. A small ditch to the side of the path holds moss-covered stones, a leaf-choked rivulet of water. As a group we come to the chain, pausing for a moment. Glances are exchanged. I do not remember who was the first across that chain, but I recall the sight of a hand, tentatively reaching out and grasping

the yellow links, slowly lifting the chain, sign clanking quietly as they slid underneath it. One-by-one, we all followed.

Beyond the chain, the gravel road continues, curving slightly under the trees before releasing into the clearing we had seen through the brush just before—here the road diverges, one side curving around to the right, one forging straight ahead, disappearing to a vanishing point somewhere in the distance. Just at the point of the road's divergence, to the left side under a small tree, sit seven rough granite boulders and a small blue trashcan; the gravel turns here too, but appears to stop just at the edge of a stand of trees, overgrown with weeds and flowers that were, at the time, quite dead. The clearing is in the shape of a long rectangle, rounded at the corners; it stretches away from you, appearing to slowly disappear into the tall trees beyond. One tall, full oak stood in the middle of the rectangle; its branches were old, covered in coarse bark that appeared menacing under the sparse dead leaves that remained overhead. We stood for a moment as a group, looking at what appeared to be two hillocks—two small mounds to either side of the gravel road that cut straight ahead, disappearing into the trees. They were covered with prairie grasses, stalks brown in the late fall air. The place looked like an empty meadow.

If there were words spoken here at this juncture, I do not remember them. In my memory, this clearing was silent, profoundly silent.

We began to walk forward, along the gravel road before us. My hands were in my pockets—I remember because I felt them clench, nails digging into my palms, as I saw the first stone. It appeared suddenly, the brown field of prairie grass broken by a patch of grayish-white. It was a headstone, the top right corner cracked, a large chunk missing where the last name should have been. The date was still intact: 1966. Just a few months over four decades old that first time I was there, yet it looked like as if it had stood there for centuries. The name was worn,



the year barely legible beneath lichens slowly working on the substrate of the stone. My eyes were frozen for a moment, caught by the sight of that white spot, then they began to refocus. Other patches of gray suddenly became more obvious.

There were headstones everywhere—most toppled over, some face-down in the dead grass; they were broken, faded, worn, weathered, strewn about, hidden by the tall grasses that grew between and among them. A patch of grass had been cleared in one area, just to the left of the path, revealing two rows of headstones—more than forty men, women, and children marked out, new flat granite stones mixed with two or three vertical ones, clearly older. Mulch had been placed over the top of one grave, the edge of a weed barrier poking out just underneath—someone was afraid that this patch would again be reclaimed by the grasses, and they didn't want to lose this grave again.

This patch, the space where the grass had been cleared, was small—even as it was about sixty feet long and twenty feet wide, it made up only a miniscule portion of the entire clearing.

We kept walking, there were more and more graves, there were more and more stones.

We kept walking, sixty feet, one hundred feet, two hundred feet, four hundred feet, a thousand feet—and still it continued, more and more.

The cemetery continued.

Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, there were broken or toppled stones.

Our group had likewise broken up, each person fanning out across the cemetery, all finding stones. We walked more slowly and carefully than in a museum; every step was precious—one might tread on a stone.

I felt my hands grow clammy, but I couldn't unclench them—a lump had set itself permanently in my throat.

I remembered the feeling of walking in a cemetery from when I had, all those years ago, lain my grandmother down to rest. I felt so heavy then, another stone upon the land, but I tried to keep my feet light; I couldn't bear to walk over that fresh patch of dirt before me knowing what—no, *who* lay beneath it. That ground was too fresh for me. Because of it, I could no longer bear to walk over any of those other patches of dirt now covered by grass that I used to stride easily across. I suddenly understood, there were *people* underneath those patches somewhere. This experience, burying my grandmother, helped me to understand the sacredness that people have long conferred upon cemeteries—every stone is a wound, just as that patch of beige dirt had been a wound to me. Headstones are a reminder, a brand on someone's life, a marker that tells you that there is someone who mattered here. Here in this cemetery, I still couldn't bear to leave the gravel path, I couldn't bear to think of treading over top of all of those unmarked bodies, all those people who matter so deeply to someone else—bodies who had once been mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, who had been children and nieces and nephews, who had been *people*, who had been important enough to memorialize in stone.

I felt every one of those stones as a wound—as *more* than just a wound, a missing place in someone's life. These cracked and broken stones—stones with dates ranging from the 1910s to the 1970s—were people who still had living relatives, people with children and grandchildren like me, people who still remember that these individuals lived and died, people who still need the solidity of the stone as a thing to lean upon—and this is something which has been denied them. To me, these stones were not just wounds, things which have begun to heal, they were fresh cuts bleeding, they were gaping holes. I could still go back to the cemetery that my



grandmother was buried in and find her lying there. I could still go back and find her stone, remember her name, think about, remember *her*—but these people whose stones had been shattered could no longer be found, could no longer be remembered. Their memories have been decimated, have been wiped out; even if they live on in the memory of someone living, they are gone, they are no longer marked upon the earth as ever having lived here. In some way, they might never have been here—there is no evidence living outside of the dusty halls of records that still hold onto their birth certificates, their death certificates.

A path opened to the left, a thousand feet in or so along the path. It took me to the edge of the woods; here the landscape rose, a hill of trees climbing at a relatively steep angle, choked with brush and fallen leaves.

I felt my throat close, my eyes burn.

There among the trees was an obelisk.

I looked higher, more stones.

Still higher, more stones, and higher—it didn't stop. The clearing didn't even show you the full scope of this cemetery, it continues beyond the boundaries which have been marked here, there are more bodies—nameless people.

I turned to the left, tears now falling down my face, hoping for a reprieve, but there, a solitary headstone stood. It was the largest one I had seen in the cemetery, a marble slab easily six feet tall, yet its face was no longer legible.

Tens of thousands of people are buried in this cemetery, but only forty or so names can still be easily found.

I turned, my head spinning, tears still falling down my face—I heard birds in the trees, there weren't any. I walked farther in, two hundred more feet, thousands more bodies.

I came upon a pile of garbage—a foam cooler, a broken microwave, cellophane wrappers, decomposing cardboard boxes, a few abandoned children's toys—all sitting in a muddy, shallow pool. A wall of dirt blocked the northern edge of the cemetery, a defense, I later learned, against the very pile of garbage that I had just found.

This is a Black cemetery. Former slaves are buried here.<sup>140</sup>

And so it had, for years, become a dumping ground for local waste; I had been told stories about people who left their trash here. Trucks, contractors who had been unwilling to pay for waste removal, would drive in and pull their tailgates down, peeling out at high speeds only to leave behind drifts of unused shingles, broken drywall, and old nails behind them. Locals who, late at night, would come in and leave their domestic garbage in heaps, sitting amongst the grave stones. Repairmen who would toss entire refrigerators, leaking coolant into the soil, leaving behind appliances and furniture. That wall of dirt I had come across, that chain across the road, were defenses left behind by people who had come in and cleaned out the cemetery, who had managed to preserve that clearing that I stood in by cutting away the youngest trees, the clearing that didn't even begin to show you the true extent of the number of graves that were there—graves receding up the hill, graves receding into the marsh adjacent to the property, a marsh that routinely flooded, no doubt toppling many of the stones we had found among the brush.

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<sup>140</sup> Shirley Washington, "Historic 'Booker T. Washington Cemetery' Covered with Trash and Toppled Tombstones," *Fox 2 Now*, March 18, 2016, <http://fox2now.com/2016/03/18/historic-booker-t-washington-cemetery-covered-with-trash-and-toppled-tombstones/>.



This is a Black cemetery, and so it was trash, a waste of space—let's make it more useful by dumping our garbage in it.

People can be a kind of garbage too, so I have learned.

I returned to this cemetery two years later with a good friend of mine; it remained unchanged, perhaps it was worse. The little cemetery in the front was still clean and well kept, the yellow chain still hung from tree to tree, the little patch of cleared graves was still mercifully clear, a bouquet of carnations had been left, wilted, on the mulch covered one. The white house was now vacant, children's toys fallen over behind an open wound in that house, a charred hole—it had succumbed to fire. It was then, standing at the divergence of the paths that I had walked down two years ago, that I realized then that the divergence of the gravel roads was in fact a three-way split. One path led straight ahead, one path curved off to the right, and that short gravel path which turned to the left—just in front of the seven granite boulders and the little blue trash can—had once been another path, turning eventually, itself running just as long as the two other paths that had been preserved. Each path was between 1,300 and 1,600 feet long, nearly six-hundred standard grave plots long. Each path divided a small strip of graves that, based upon the cleared area, had been between six and eight rows deep. These three gravel paths, 600 by six to eight, tell me that something around 11,000 plots were once here—and this does not include the graves that stretch up onto the hill, graves that I climbed up towards on that second visit with my friend.

I remember finding him standing in front of a solitary standing headstone somewhere up on that hill, a tree root just missing its edge. He was in tears. He had climbed that hill, foot by foot, finding grave after grave after grave after grave, realizing as he went that it just didn't

stop—here too there were toppled and cracked stones, here too there were children and parents, relatives, people.

I remember him saying that this place felt so heavy, that it was all too much. I agreed. I remember him saying that it felt, standing there in front of that grave and understanding that this cemetery *just didn't stop*, as if we were standing on top of a mass grave.

America is a race war, evidenced by our history, shown to us by the location of this cemetery—on cheap, unnoticeable land that frequently floods—told to us viscerally by the knowledge that this place was a garbage dump for years, made apparent to us by the continued neglect of this space.

America is a race war, and this cemetery—these tens of thousands of people—is but one casualty.

Timothy Thomas is but one casualty, Samuel DuBose is but one casualty, Eric Garner is but one casualty—and the bodies keep piling up, drifts of them, *mass graves* of them. There isn't even enough land here anymore to bury more men, more women, more children, more people—the land is full, more than 13,000 bodies.<sup>141</sup>

America is a race war.

And it just doesn't stop.

Rolling hills full of bodies, amber waves of grain fattened, all fed by bodies. Blood money.

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<sup>141</sup> Terri Maddox, "St. Clair County Researcher to Share Black Cemetery Records with Public," *Belleville News-Democrat*, May 5, 2016, <http://www.bnd.com/living/magazine/article75757162.html>.



Indeed, rust is the best name for this belt of land; it is a red mark, a wound, a gash, a fount of blood which lies exhausted upon the land.

America, each and every one, is a race war.

We both had tears in our eyes as we stood in that place, that solitary gravestone marking another body to add to the count, another child whose skin was a reminder of their place: social refuse, garbage, worthless people—people that are of more use to us filling out our prisons, doing labor for us.<sup>142</sup>

It was a profoundly silent place, even as the early spring trees filled with birds.

As we descended off of that hill, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of this place, a man walked toward us from the entrance. He was tall with strong arms and a broad chest; he wore a plaid button-down shirt and gray pants, sunglasses shielded his eyes. His skin was a light brown, his hair black—he introduced himself to us, his name was Rick and he owned a farm that was on the other side of that wall of dirt that marked the northern edge of the cemetery. He had put the barrier there, as a means to help the local women who had undertaken cleaning up the cemetery prevent more trash dumping. We got some of their names, Myra, Delvonte, Billie, Judy. Many of them had family buried here, and had worked for multiple decades to clean, document, and push for funds to restore the cemetery.<sup>143</sup> Rick told me, however, that the push for restoration had met a dead end bureaucratically; many of the women had since disbanded. One researcher and advocate I talked to, a professor from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, had worked with Myra; they told me that they had not heard from Myra in years,

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<sup>142</sup> Ava DuVernay, *13th*, Film, Documentary (Forward Movement & Kandoo Films, 2016).

<sup>143</sup> Maddox, “Black Cemetery Records”; Washington, “Historic ‘Booker T. Washington Cemetery’ Covered with Trash and Toppled Tombstones.”

even though multiple attempts to contact her were made. It seems that the strain of working on the cemetery—a vast and weighty place—was great, even for these strong women.

Rick said that he tries to keep an eye on the place and make sure that no one is desecrating it with more trash. He also said that very few people ever come here anymore.

“Maybe once or twice a year someone comes, looking for a grave. I always tell them they’re welcome to pull down the chain and drive in, but I know that most people won’t be successful.”

“This place is massive,” I agreed.

Rick simply nodded, head heavy.

As my friend and I drove away, tears still lining our eyes, the sky clouded over.

I heard birds.

It was a profoundly quiet place.

It is a place that has changed me, has changed my friend; I do not know how one could stand in that clearing, in that abandoned place, and not be changed at some level, not be touched by the immensity of the destruction, the racialized violence which has been wrought on that place.

13,000 people, snuffed out.

Gone.

It is a profoundly quiet place.



*Eastern Market, Detroit 2018*

After the Boggs center, we headed over to the Eastern-Market—a historic district for the sale of hay, wood, livestock, and produce in the city center. It's collection of nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture, its proximity to downtown, and the recent emphasis on farm-to-table initiatives have made the region the epicenter of a wave of gentrification, begun most clearly in the early 2000s when the city handed over the historically publicly funded site to a private corporation who then expanded the historic district to include more real estate, thus also raising their value. The streets immediately around the market sheds have become home to craft breweries, coffee roasteries, juiceries, bars, boutiques, tailored restaurants, and vibrant murals recalling the graffiti that naturally occurs in other portions of the city. When we arrived, two older Black men were waiting on a bench for the bus, another was crossing the street from an adjacent alley to talk with them. White people, mostly men, were sporting thicker coats, kept their hands in their pockets and their eyes in front of them as they moved quickly down the street, taking up space as they went. Being a weekday, the market was quiet, a majority of the shops shuttered, yet there was still a clear gentrified presence in the area.

We entered a deli, sat quietly at a Formica table reflecting on the morning's conversation. Only a few other patrons were there, a white woman in a black coat by the storefront, a Black woman directly behind us, and a businessman just behind her. Our server was white, a man sporting trendy round glasses, a flannel, and a well-kept short beard. The food was delicious, the coffee served was bright and highly drinkable, all served on a well-curated set of dishes recalling a midcentury diner.

The contrast between this place—curated and kept, pricey and exclusive—and the one next door—a mom-and-pop “Coney Island” or diner—was distinct and obvious; the diner seemed to be doing well, the Coney Island was not so sure. The natural questions about who this space belonged to, who was allowed, who had been priced out of the places that had used to populate the area—like the Coney Island next door. Like the stone house, Eastern Market felt like a disturbed ruin; its pace had changed, it was no longer in suspension. But it was not an us-them situation; the people behind the counter were working class, they too had to sell themselves to make ends meet, they too were being exploited by the draw of the eastern market—who’s clearly marked public was a better sign of who it was meant to serve than any amount of racial profiling could offer. This place held as much contradiction in it as the Boggs center—an institute disguised as a house, a neighborhood in transition. The white man with his flannel and beard was as much a member of the community as the Black men sitting at the bus stop, each had built a reality for themselves in Detroit that fit them—built out of the means and social circles that they had access to, different in-kind because of history, because of society, because of economics, etc.; what was in contradiction was not that the white man and the Black men existed in the same space, was not that one of them was at fault for the other’s predicament—those issues are not a product of the realities that they had each built for themselves, but of the systemic deck-stacking that has been played out by the social elite who have descended on the carcass of Detroit to make profit and “development.” What was in contradiction was that their two distinct versions of Detroit were coming up against each other and they had to change themselves as a result; what is also in contradiction is the differentiation between the ability of each of these people’s realities to flex and bend to meet each other. It is undoubtable and unavoidable to say that the white man’s reality is more rigid, his version of Detroit is more easily affirmed, less prone to fracture



than the two Black men who might have sat at that bus stop for decades. It is their reality which has to be rebuilt, which has to address the social changes of the market, who might not be able to sit at that bus stop much longer—benches are easier to move than history; or at least *certain* histories are easier to move than others—these two men on the corner are history too.

*The Detroit Maker Force & Guy, Detroit, 2018*

When we arrived at The Detroit Maker Force I was sure we were in the wrong place; it looked like a hospital, was marked like a hospital, and had a decidedly institutional appearance—faux-brick exterior, an arch motif, solid and symmetrical appearance as if it held up a great weight. I called The Detroit Maker Force, sure that we had made a wrong turn.

“You’re in the right place,” they assured me. “Come in the front doors and we’ll meet you by the desk.”

So we walked up and in under the front block, the clear remnants of an emergency-wing entrance in place. Inside, just pass the airlock, and on overly-designed glass-block and wood veneer desk, was a smiling Black woman and a slouchier man.

“Are you Ben?” she asked.

“Yes, and this is—”

“Noah,” he said.

“Welcome!” Ashley took us back, past old wards and medical clinics, back to the farthest corner of the building. There, behind a pair of double doors, we were met with the remains of what used to be a small patient wing—individual rooms flanking a nurses’ station now serving as a makeshift studio. Digitally designed and fabricated furniture was strewn about, tables topped in widgets and doodads made in the machines also populated the workbenches. A small crew of people, maybe eight to ten, were there, some working on computers, others talking amongst themselves. Our guide introduced us to Guy, a brunette-haired, ginger-bearded man in work-boots, jeans, a graphic tee and flannel. At the time he was working with a white woman who had



a file open for a finger-jointed box she wanted to cut. He handed her over to a tall Black man with dreads and then shook our hands, asked us how much we knew about the program, the purpose for our visit. After the formalities, he gave us a short tour, showing us the machines—a 4' x 8' CNC-router, a desktop router, an internally ventilated laser cutter, a CNC vinyl cutter, three filament extruding 3D printers, two SLS 3D printers, sewing tools, and an electronics room each informally taking up former patient spaces, material stored haphazardly, cheesy vinyl signs demarcating the contents of each room. Guy was emphatic about the importance of fab labs, the innovativeness of the nationally organized and run program, how it helped to offer “job training” and “real-world skills” to people in the community; it was supposed to be an open-access lab, people could just “walk in” to this facility—itsself surrounded on all sides by multi-lane streets, barricaded off by gates, appearing as an imposing, heavy, institutional mass that made even myself and my partner uncertain about entering the building.

Guy also was frank about the state of the organization, how they were having trouble finding students and staff, how many of the lab users were middle-class white people doing arts and crafts with the resources they provided. As of now, the group was just trying to maintain itself and build a stronger foundation. They were in the middle of their biggest program, their apprenticeship, yet all their students had mysteriously gone home for the day. We were there with mostly staff. He hedged on that, stating how the programs were teaching people how to use the tools so that they could then teach others. When I asked him more about the service of the shop to the community, however, he instead diverted our attention to the “parametric” tables that they produced—for profit—that had been the attention of Adam Savage on his visit to the area. I learned that a portion of their funding, likely a large portion, came from fulfilling mass orders from local companies and businesses for these tables and other custom-designed pieces of

furniture. They used to do these same services, apparently, for individual clients—some pro-bono—but Guy was insistent that they would be phasing that out, it wasn't economically sustainable for them—but then again they are a non-profit.

Guy then directed our attention a curtained-off area of the studio with a large sign on it saying “sorry for the inconvenience, we’re trying to save the world.” He pulled back the curtains to reveal a low bed, a shower stall, and cabinetry with a small sink in it. He explained that they were working on producing prototypes for tiny homes for the homeless. “It’ll have a composting toilet, a shower, a little kitchen in it,” you know—it was everything one might need in 64 square feet. It seemed that the prototype had been a side hobby of the group for a while; it too appeared alongside the tables they produced on a recent media feature of the non-profit. Guy was very proud of the unit, and it was a very nicely crafted thing. Everything was made from finish-grade plywood, the bevels and joints carefully thought out in obvious detail. Numerous questions began to pop up in my mind; had they really worked with homeless people on the design of these things? How would they teach them about composting toilets? Would they have access to the chemicals and resources to maintain them? If the whole thing was made from plywood, was this meant to only be a temporary solution? How were they thinking about the actual situation of the individual homeless person? Was there a guarantee that the unit would be used by one person? What about overcrowding? Who got to use these if they were deployed?

There were so many holes in the design—it seemed that The Detroit Maker Force was so much more interested in making something with the narrative of “housing the homeless” than they were in actually addressing the issues that come with the situation of the homeless person. The thought which immediately came to mind was the origin of minimum square-footage laws: slum-lords building tenements as small as possible, cramming renters into smaller-than-promised



rentals with full control over the security of their family—at times the only option were these too-cramped spaces. The tiny-home movement, of which this prototype is arguably a member, rails against these laws as examples of how American consumerism has been embedded into law; what they fail to understand is that these laws exist to ensure that the very exploitation of the homeless and the vulnerable which this prototype seems to address could not occur.

The dissonance between the public message of the group—of allowing the community to determine and educate itself, of democratizing the means of production for the public good—and the reality the group was making for themselves was deafening.

We next asked Guy why he had come to Detroit. He told us that he was drawn to the city because it was “the place to be,” that there was so much exciting stuff going on, so many people trying to make a better way for the city that he had to come and be a part of it. He claimed that he had come to serve, to be an ally, to be *solid* with the people here—but it seemed, based on how he phrased it and the projects he focused on, that he was really interested less in serving the community, than in asking what the city could do for him, how it could make him feel like the social-justice warrior that he wanted to be inside. It seemed that the group itself was like this—they were insistent that the skills and tools that they were bringing to the community were a game changer, yet here they were helping a white woman craft a box for her mementos, selling tables to companies, sitting in their walled-off, inaccessible, and sterile corner of this defunct institution, “saving the world” with plywood and composting toilets. Outside, people are dying of hunger and cold, violence, contradiction, of social pressure, but in here it’s all sawdust and computers as they buzz away showing off their little trinkets and tools, “helping people learn marketable skills,” so that they might return to the system which begot the very economic and social pressures that imploded the city in the first place.

They were so convinced about the goodness of their intentions that they forgot to look outside and hear the people that they claimed to be helping. Without adaptation, without questioning, without critique they had brought a program intended for suburban soccer families to a place where the primary issue facing the community might better be equated to a race war. The results have yet to be seen, despite six years of community engagement, despite dozens of classes of apprentices coming out of the system, despite a televised visit from a prominent celebrity—despite their solution for saving the world, Detroit remains in freefall.



*Man on the Blue Schwinn Bike, 2016; Brighton, 2017; Kat, 2018; Detroit*

It was a cold fall evening, the sun had begun to set, and I was in Detroit. I had just finished a day of meetings with local organizers and had made my way over to Corktown to see a local abandoned landmark: The Michigan Central Train Depot. I parked my car just to the west of Roosevelt Park; the sun glanced low across the buildings, lighting an orange fire on the side of the beige brick tower, seeming to restore it for a moment; it appeared almost whole. I was back in the city less than four months after I had stood in that same spot before the same building with a class of fellow students, listening to my professor talk generally about the building and its history. As we talked, heads craned back at the peak of the building, a Black man rode up quietly on a child's blue Schwinn bike, plastic orange pennant waving from a four-foot rod behind him. He was dressed in a blue-and-white striped polo, baggy black cargo jeans, and a cap that used to be black; his face was lined with a dusting of scraggly salt-and-peeper stubble, and his face was loose and open; a set of warm brown eyes looked first at us, and then up at the spot we were staring as a group, and then back.

He butted into the conversation, "I used to live in there you know, before they boarded it all up." Many of our class looked up at him in shock, he had come up so quietly.

"Great building, isn't it?" he said, grinning widely, "Used to be the tallest building in the city, tallest train depot in the whole country too. They quarried the marble for the station out in Virginia. Used to have a whole bunch of us living up in there, man it was the life; the whole station is just so beautiful. There was a big community of graffiti artists that worked in there, I'd help 'em get in through the underground tunnels—there's a whole network of tunnels under the station, reach out as far as a mile, really wide, open, great for my bike—they've talked about tearing this place down; I tell you, if they do that, this country is going to lose some of its finest

examples of urban art, those graffiti murals in there are priceless. People go in there all the time, made the place real interesting to live in; base-jumpers loved it. One time, a man climbed up all the way to the roof and just jumped off; well the police saw his chute and started coming in, but he just landed himself over there in that yard by the church, cut his chute off and took off—it was a close chase but he didn't even get caught, made the nightly news. Yeah this building is really something, used to be part of the Underground Railroad, did you know that? Say, do you all want a picture in front of her? I'd be honored to do that for you."

"No thanks," someone said.

"Ah no worries, no worries; say, you wouldn't happen to be able to help a guy out would ya? If you could spare just a few dollars, I'd be real grateful."

Together, the group scrounged up about twenty dollars to give to him, a small price to pay for the history lesson we had just been given.

"Much obliged!" the man said, pedaling off down the street. He whistled as he went.

Sometimes, I think about this man riding through a dark tunnel underground, flashlight taped to his handlebars, orange pennant flapping, whistling all the way.

It was to this spot that I wanted to return, to see the station again, to see if the man on the blue Schwinn would turn up again. I made my way down to the tip of the park; a large U.S. flag hangs from a pole just in front of the station. That day it flapped loudly in the breeze, bringing a constant clanging to the park, highlighting just how empty the place really was. I stood for a moment, just as before, staring up at the top of the station. No man came.



I crossed the street, standing now immediately before the chain-link fence topped with rolls of razor wire that kept out people like the man I had met. No man came.

I walked around the perimeter of the fence. Several cars pulled around to the front of the station during this time, each one slowing itself, inching forward as a window was rolled down, white faces peeping out. Few cars stopped. Fewer still ever got out. No man came.

I spent about twenty minutes walking the perimeter, seeing the steel frame from the former train depot covered in tarps, many torn. Small graffiti tags appeared here and there, most all the way at the top of the building, nearly two-hundred feet in the air. Stone lintels on the main façade dangled precipitously off; several carved details were broken or missing; water stains covered every inch of the building.

Between the last time I had visited and today, the tower's windows had all been replaced, glass was back in all of them for the first time in decades; inside, the blue glow of fluorescent bulbs shone from every floor; the building was empty. It is interesting how often lights like this get left on in the name of safety, in stores, in office buildings, in abandoned buildings like this; it's the only way to see trespassers on security footage, and so the lights are always on somewhere in those places that people fear entrance, in those places that people fear the man on the blue Schwinn. As I walked, no man came.

After a half hour, I gave up, heading back to my car. I dug for my keys, one pocket and then the next; nowhere to be found. I had locked them in my car. I could see them. The sun was still in the process of setting, and the sky was tinged with orange and yellow, streaks of pink. I didn't mind being locked out so much; my insurance offered assistance, so I walked to a nearby café to sit and wait, and call. As I walked, I passed several derelict structures including a tall,

wedge-shaped brick one with soot markings beside each window, just visible behind the plywood that had been attached at each opening. I passed nearly a full block of abandoned buildings. I waited at a stoplight, across the street, storefronts with shiny windows glowed orange in the setting sun; a string of light bulbs hung from one bar out over what would have been sidewalk seating in the summer; there was the clear presence of gentrification here, white people in stylish clothes walked in groups, herds, from place to place, some clearly bar-hopping, a little drunk. In the street, and on the stoops of some abandoned stores, Black men and women sat, heavily bundled against the cold, holding cardboard signs, begging. I passed one as I entered the café, he was asleep against a light post.

The back wall of the café featured a large, pop-art astronaut, the barista was white, male, long-blond hair; the cashier was black, male, with a tight black t-shirt. I ordered a cortado; it was five dollars.

One always pays for the privilege to sit inside under capitalism; one always pays to be warm.

I called the company, it would be another forty-five minutes before someone could be out my way; I had to wait. So I finished my business, used the restroom, and left; the homeless beggar was still asleep under the lamppost. It was now fully dark, and the light had flickered on, a yellow glow. I took a left, walking away from Roosevelt Park and the depot. A white couple passed me, arms wrapped around their torsos in the cold. A Black man leaned against a column just off to the left. He wore a thick, heavy coat of gray with a pointed hood drawn up around his face, there were a few stains here and there; underneath that he wore a gray sweater, thick black pants and black boots. His hands were bare, I know because as I approached, he pushed himself forward and brought his hands down to his side; they were rough, worn.



“Hey man,” he began, “would you be able to spare any change? I’m out here starving.”

I didn’t have any cash on me, but I told him that I would buy him a meal; he thanked me.

“Where to?” I asked.

“There’s a White Castle just a half-a-block down, he said,” his hands pointing, enthusiastic. “My name’s Brighton, by the way,” he added, extending his right hand.

“I’m Ben, nice to meet you.” We shook hands, walking off towards the White Castle, away from the depot still.

“You from around here?” Brighton asked.

“No, I’m from Indiana, just up visiting some people here.”

“Ah, I see.” He didn’t say much.

“How did you end up in Detroit?” I asked.

“I’m not from Detroit,” Brighton began, “I just got released from prison up here; I don’t know anyone in this city, they just dropped me at the gate, I’ve been on my own ever since,”

“I’m sorry,” I said, not realizing at the time that this kind of story was common. Men like Brighton would be shipped to prisons with the appropriate amount of beds, even if those prisons were tens, hundreds, thousands of miles away, and those prisons would pay to have them; they all got state-subsidized money for doing so: more prisoners, more money. But it also took people away from their support networks, it left people like Brighton on the street with no money, no people to contact, no way to get home. They were stuck. This is what made Brighton homeless. The system made Brighton homeless. They used him as a source of money, took him away from his home, and then dumped him on the side of the road. Waste populations.

We arrived at the White Castle; it was small, no inside seating. The cashier was a white woman, she spoke through two-inch bullet-proof Perspex; a transaction slot was cut at the bottom. Brighton ordered through a microphone, the woman slid a door open for my card, and I slid it through. We stood in the tiny vestibule, silent. Brighton's food was slid through another slot; this too felt like a kind of prison.

I thanked the woman, she looked surprised to hear that, and we left. As we walked back towards the depot, and the spot where Brighton had been standing, he pulled one of the diminutive burgers out of the bag.

"So what are you doing on this end of town?" I asked.

"It's the place to be," Brighton said matter-of-fact, burger in hand, "everyone is down here, and the *ladies*," he said, taking a bite.

I laughed a little bit to myself.

"Do you know anyone on this side of town?" he asked.

I didn't.

He said that that was too bad, he really likes it here, and the people are real nice. He seemed hopeful about the prospects he had about getting back to the town he came from. He seemed excited about the prospect of meeting some "ladies" on this end of town—a mostly empty place, save for the white gentrifiers that came by.

"Are you gay?" he asked simply.

"I am," I said, nervous.



“That’s cool, that’s cool,” Brighton said, starting in on his second burger, “some of my best friends are gay.” It is a line I hear often, and yet here it seemed different, more honest than most. Brighton seemed to be simply adding information to the conversation, not simply insisting that he wasn’t homophobic. We had arrived back at the spot he had been standing, and Brighton resumed leaning against the wall as he munched on some fries. We chatted some more about Corktown, the train depot, and his future; he seemed relaxed as he stood there in the cold night air, he seemed to be comfortable here.

The conversation trailed off and I decided I should probably get back to my car. “Take care man,” I said, “and stay warm.” The night had gotten significantly chillier, many of the other homeless people had left, likely to find shelter before the night got too much colder.

“Oh I will,” Brighton said, “thanks for the food.”

“Any time,” I replied.

We shook hands again, both of us going separate ways—me towards the depot, him away from it.

I met up with the man who was supposed to unlock my car, a Latino technician in a blue sedan. The exchange was very matter of fact, except for an off-hand line, “you don’t want to be in this part of town after dark like this,” he said to me.

I didn’t reply.

Brighton was in this place.

The man with the blue Schwinn was in this place.

As I drove away, the lights in the depot shone blue and bright against the black night sky, a secure place. Yellow streetlights still shone down on some homeless men and women who had bunked down in the fronts of old abandoned stores, men and women who might be warmer inside the depot; I didn't see Brighton again.

I haven't seen Brighton since. Such is the nature of rust-belt cities. I hope he found his way home, but I know better than that. Brighton, the man on the blue Schwinn, people like this come into our lives, hopeful, full of life; they are people like Kenny, open, honest, full of knowledge and stories to tell. Just as quickly as they came, they disappear, never to be seen again.

Sometimes, I think about the man with the bike riding through a dark tunnel underground, flashlight taped to his handlebars, orange pennant flapping, whistling all the way.

Sometimes, I think about Brighton and his apparent positivity about his situation: "this is the place to be." I think about his thick gray coat, the cold of the night.

Sometimes I think about that woman working in the White Castle behind bulletproof glass; I wonder how she thinks about people like me and Brighton. I wonder what her own life is like, how much the devastation of this city might have affected her too. I wonder why Brighton asked if I was gay; I wonder about what other kinds of transactions he has been forced to take part in in exchange for food, for shelter, for him to raise that kind of question.

Sometimes I think about the blueness of those lights in the depot, their presence as a reminder that squatters are not welcome here. I wonder where the man on the blue Schwinn sleeps now.



Detroit is full of people like these; people that come into our lives but for only a moment, just to vanish again into the night, never to be heard from again. They hold so much knowledge, so much hope, so much potential, and yet they disappear without a trace. Such is the nature of rust-belt cities

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I had returned to Detroit for a third time, putting off dinner that day until me and my good friend Noah had had time to make it around to all of the sites we had planned to visit that day; by the time that we were ready to eat, most everything had closed down. We found ourselves left with a few late-night options and chose one whose menu seemed appealing to us—a “trendy” Asian restaurant that seemed reasonable. It sat to the southwest of downtown, across from the old Michigan Central Train Depot—the hulking, beaux-arts mass which continues to sit empty, its new glass glowing blue in the night.

When we arrived at the restaurant, we were not sure we were in the right place, the block was mostly silent, most stores closed, a few rambunctious white people making their way back to their cars. The building we were directed to was painted entirely white, surrounded by a gleaming silver chain link fence; decorative trees with white lights around them lined a path up to what appeared to be a heavy, riveted metal door. Hesitantly, we opened it.

We immediately entered into another city. Inside, everything was neon and black—exposed block and translucent paneling were set to a track of deafening electric music; a full bar of liquor sat behind a concrete counter. We were seated on the other side of the bar, on low wooden benches. I was baffled by the stark difference this place represented to the world outside. It was full of obviously wealthy patrons, the staff were young and mixed race, a frenetic and

vibrant atmosphere seemed to envelop the patrons as they ate and drank through a plentiful array of artisan cocktails and courses. This place was sheer abundance; it exuded a young and energetic kind of luxury. Outside, in the shadow of the decaying train depot, was a mass of dilapidated buildings, a strip lined with fast-food chains equipped with bullet-proof glass, a smattering of individuals who were homeless, cold, begging for money. It felt to us that the existence of a place like this, in such close proximity to a place like that, was too great of a contradiction; these worlds could not exist in the same time and geography.

Our server, Kat, came over with water and menus. Like the space, she was young and vibrant—she wore a mesh shirt over a strapless bra patterned with roses and simple slacks, all in black; every staff member wore black here. There was a hopefulness and exuberance about Kat as she poured our first glasses of water; she asked us about our astrological signs, she was a Capricorn—Noah was an Aquarius—she asked us about our rising moons; her laugh was infectious as we shared our star signs and moons. “I’m very fiery and earthy, so I’m very passionate about working,” she told us. Throughout the meal she shared herself enthusiastically with us, telling us about the city she had chosen to call home.

I asked her what she thought of Detroit, and she answered much like Brighton and very honestly: it was the place to be, an up-and-coming city where you could be anything and anyone that you wanted to be; it was a place to fulfill your dreams. She had come to work and live here because she saw the opportunities within this city as an opportunity to redefine herself. “I’ve always wanted to own my own restaurant,” she said, she loved connecting and sharing herself with other people and she wanted to provide a space that did that on her own terms, allowed her to help define space for others as well.



Kat described a Detroit of hope and opportunity, a community-building place not unlike Rob's ideal city. Her vision too was idealistic; she was a representation of the American Dream, building herself up so that she could have the resources to open a place of her own. Detroit is a dream city, a city of possibility, a city of opportunity. Kat's Detroit exists, just like Robert's, just like Kenny's, just like Packard's; each version of the story is true, but which will one day win out over the other?

We ended the meal with a coconut ice cream topped with mango and almonds; the flavors were unreal, the textures impossible, the experience heightened by the space we were in—a dislocated reality, a reality just adjacent to reality. Kat had poured herself out for us, and it was tangible in this bowl—this ice cream felt itself like a promise, a dream, an intangible reality that could not exist, that oscillated between truth and fiction—like Kat's or Brighton's or Kenny's Detroit, it was always on the cusp of becoming, but always in threat of failure.

We paid the bill, thanked Kat profusely, and stumbled back outside—the blue glow of the depot felt somehow stronger, the street felt somehow backwards. As we twisted and turned our way out of the city, it felt as if the world was pressing in on all sides—how could it be that such opulence and wealth, such hopefulness and passion, could exist next to such decay and poverty, such despair and apathy? The world felt confused, a little too bright—no, too dark... the pavement seemed to melt, buildings loomed in at comical angles, the emptiness of their windows felt oppressive. Everything refused to fit together as we began to realize that multiple versions of the city were competing to exist simultaneously, but none of them were true yet.

There was an excess of everything, it was all too much; the city was slick with realities, a black substance that clung to every surface. Everything had begun to blur into each other, nothing but a stream of lights when, suddenly, the city snapped in two and the buildings righted

themselves again. The pavement stopped flowing, the black substance receded as everything returned to solidity: it became clear, there is no city, no Detroit, only narratives of the city, narratives of Detroit—Rob’s Detroit and Kenny’s Detroit and Kat’s Detroit and Brighton’s Detroit and the man on the blue Schwinn’s Detroit are all *true*, they all exist, but these stories are not yet real, they remain only potentials, possibilities held within the everyday. Each narrative is a sleeve, fitting tightly around the physical spaces of Detroit, reorienting the view, recoloring the photograph to bring out different portions that you didn’t notice before, to bring out different possibilities. I began to realize that all these realities existed simultaneously and multiply, that Brighton and Kat could exist mere feet from each other, within the same city and still live in totally separate cities, that the apparent contradiction of these cities was just that: apparent, surface-level, immaterial. They did not contradict each other, they were facets of the same reality, they were each representative of possibilities, contingent futures that were founded from the individual’s own identity and history and the opportunities afforded them by society, the things they had come to learn as true. Of course they saw the city differently: they were fundamentally different identities, fundamentally different components that had each been afforded fundamentally different places in the world. Of course there are multiple realities, multiple truths, multiple people; such is the nature of rust-belt cities, of post-industrial cities, of reality.

Everything is multiple, everything is ambiguous.

In the distance, the MGM Grand and Motor City Casinos pulsed with light. Like the depot, their brightness felt suddenly oppressive, but also comically unreal—they were paper-thin, cardboard cutouts, ephemeral in nature like the skins of each of the Detroit’s we had been exposed to through the years.



What is the likelihood that any of them will come to fruition? The homeless, the beggar, the worker, the social activist, each bounded by their own identities, their place within society. Certain histories are easier to move than others, certain lives are weightier than others, certain futures are afforded more potential to become than others, and all of this is founded by the machine of capital and how it has structured society along lines of force, couplings and linkages. Certain futures have a better chance of becoming actualized than others, Kat's over Brighton's, white over Black, worker over beggar; we do not need to study these individuals in great empirical depth to know this in our very being: certain lives are weightier than others, and weight aligns well with race and gender and sex and class and religion, etc. Such is the nature of the rust-belt city, the nature of cities, of capital in general.

Yet everything remains contingent, unsure, unhappened.

Everything is contingent.

Everything might yet be.

Everything might not.

Such is the nature of the rust-belt city.

*Part III -  
Lines of Flight*



### By Way of Conclusion

There is a strip of land here in the United States which does not seem to belong; it is a red mark, a wound, a fount of blood which now lies exhausted upon the land.

It is the rust belt.

We have told ourselves as a country that this belt of land is an aberration, a fluke, it couldn't happen again. Even so, what created this wound, what drew out the blood and caused death to invest itself in these places, is a rot that continues to grow and spread within our social body. It is the oppression of capitalism, the suppression of desire and human freedom in favor of wealth accumulation, capital mobilization, and class stratification, which generates this rot; it continues to eat at our society, continues to characterize our social interactions and create false desires—so long as we labor under capitalism, so long as we create unhealthy social couplings in the name of it, we shall not be free of this threat, shall not be free of decay, of death.

And so the rot which expressed itself in the rust belt and its cities is not gone. The creation of the rust belt was not an aberration. It shall happen again. Other gashes will emerge. Other blood will be spilt. And when the decay once again emerges, when fresh blood is spilt, then that is when there shall be the greatest opportunity to heal the body of our society, to remake the couplings and linkages that have held us in bondage for so long and build in their place new ones, formed along axes of our true, political desires—it is a potential that has been shown to us here in the rust belt.

Failure generates new forces, frictions and its epiphenomenal irruptions, that hold within them great possibility for the critique and resistance of capitalism; failure holds radical potential.

It is in service of this radical potential and the search for methods to break down unhealthy linkages and heal them with more desirable ones, that this project looks closely at the manner in which society is studied and discusses how one might reexamine, critique, and replace these approaches, particularly as they pertain to the city—the locus of many of the failures that have created the rust belt as a geographical zone.

Too often, the city is totalized, objectified, turned into something that can be too easily grasped and digested. The researcher, from their Icarian perspective beyond the city itself, understands the city as fixed, a thing that can be quantified and described, discovered in the pages of laws and letters. What this approach to understanding achieves is indeed an image of the city, a flattened plane projection observed from above, something that can be generalized and diagrammed, a dead thing. This also robs the city of that quality which is essential to it: the lives of its inhabitants. The city is a construct made by people, and so it lives and moves and breathes, changes from one minute to the next.

Seeing the city from above, while useful in grasping certain trends and understanding certain characteristics, does an injustice to it: the people who constitute and make the city in their everyday practices are robbed of their voices, their perspectives; they are told how they should see their city, they are told that they cannot understand the very entity that they create from their perspective on the ground—and yet this is precisely the inverse of the truth: what is seen from above, what is read as movements and trends, what is documented in laws and bills and economics, are the movements of the people on the ground—these are the traces of their life, oxidized into physical ephemera that give us a glimpse into the truth of the city: its lived experience. Cities cannot be understood from above alone, even as this offers one way to enter



into the city; cities still must be entered, engaged with in other ways, experienced on the ground, and *lived* in order to be fully understood.

In order to fully understand the city, we must let the people who live within them speak for themselves: it is their city, this is their story to tell.

What is revealed in these narratives are not only those things which could be seen from above—history and geography and economics, among other things.—but also hidden movements and practices that were not visible from above; new understanding is brought to the research of the city through the engagement with it inside lived experience. In order to find, within this lived experience, other ways into the city and other ways of reading it as lived experience, we have sought out new axes and other kinds of lenses that simultaneously divide and unify diverse identities, experiences, geographies, times, and histories in ways that allow them to be reinterpreted and reread as part of a larger story. This approach reveals not only the minute detail and nuance of a life, but also macroscopic movements and trends that are occurring across the rust belt—movements that suggest other possible movements, paths into the future, lines of flight that take us farther than we ever could have imagined from the objective observer's place outside and beyond the city.

These lines, suggested by lived experience, made clearer by the deployment of these new axes and lenses of understanding, also reveal their own radical contingencies. Each life suggests its own lines, and each line requires certain actions that must be taken up for the future they imply to be brought about, to be actualized and made real. What's more, the two sides of each axis lie so close to each other, they are divided by something the size of a thin wafer, a sheet of paper; and just so, each side contains even thinner realities, possibilities, potentialities—it is all so paper-thin, it could be ripped to shreds with the slightest motion.

Everything is contingent, everything must be brought into being and then affirmed again and again—and even this depends, it depends heavily on the identity of the people who take up action to bring about these lines of flight and begin the process of actualizing the future they point toward.

As we have seen, certain identities are weightier than others; some people live lives so light that they simply disappear, they vanish, and with them they take those lines that their very being in these places suggested.

Everything is contingent.

Everything depends.

And so it is important to write about them, to write with this contingency in mind, to allow individuals to tell their own stories, and then bring those stories to wider audiences—not as tools to tighten up the workings of the machine, not as manuals for repairing and maintaining the control which capitalism institutes (as Sugrue did), but as methods for amplifying resistance, for sharpening critique, for revealing the real possibilities that exist for living lives beyond the confines of a capitalistic society. Such is the demand that these experiences make of us as researchers.

Nevertheless, this action of recording and documenting holds within itself other dangers, dangers like historicism, the potential of culture's own reification: "there has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one



set of hands into another.”<sup>144</sup> What we must strive to do in disrupting the traditional approach of the study of the city, and society in general, is to achieve that which Benjamin expects of the historical materialist, the counter-historicist. We must move “as far away from [historicism] as measurably possible. [The historical materialist] regards it as his task to *brush history against the grain*,” and to upset our understanding of “culture,” to turn history upside down through the formation of a new methodological approach.<sup>145</sup>

What we have heard in this document is not the history of the rust belt as it has been traditionally told; there are no grand master narratives. Here instead there are micro-narratives full of individuals and the messiness of their lives; there are the reaction and response of these lives to other lives; there is how, together, all of this amounts to new potentials. There is not history alone here, not history in the sense of merely recording the paths of past societies. There is also the discovery of individual life and the potential that these lives hold for the formation of radical futures.

There is, likewise, the discovery of the radical contingency of these futures, how they might be snuffed out. Individuals alone do not seem to be enough to bring about these futures, futures suggestive of true freedom. To actualize these futures, movements must be made; as Rob might say, what is needed now is to move from emergence to convergence.

And here is where this document can be put to use, to bring these tactics to light and show that they are being deployed on regional scales, that there is the potential of a movement nascent in these places. Doing so is itself the taking up of resistances; it is the creation of new

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<sup>144</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Dennis Redmond (Theses on History, 1974), <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ThesesOnHistory.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Emphasis added, Benjamin.

forces that might help to strengthen certain lines of flight, which might add weight to certain lived experiences and help to ensure the emergence of certain radical possibilities.

And this work that they are doing, this critical mission, is just the beginning.

This is but one part of the story of those forgotten people who make their life within the rust belt; it is a deep fragment, a recording.

There remain other stories yet untold.

And so we must continue to go out into the world to engage with people and the lives that they make for themselves.

In order to do so we must each find our own ways in, our own paths of approach.

For me, those paths have been multiple, simultaneously theoretical and spatial and human; they have been frictions and hauntings and heroes, they have been Matt and Betsy and Annette, Rob and Daniel and Kenny, Lili and Aaron and Brian, Packard and Booker T. and the Eastern Market, Incite-Focus and Guy, the man on the blue Schwinn bike and Brighton and Kat. These have been the sites of my walks, my conversations; countless other walks remain, countless other approaches can be made.

There are yet other ways to observe the city and to reveal its hidden and transformative possibilities to the world.

This is just the beginning, just an elegy, just the discovery of pain.

And so let us go out—as individuals, as neighbors, as people, as academics, as components held within this vast and globalizing machine—marked by our identities.



Let us go out into the world, knowing that we are but one point of view on an infinite spectrum of views, to see what we can see, to hear what we can hear, to feel with our hands the bodies of liberation that have been hidden from us by walls and borders and laws.

There is nothing but potentiality in such a search.

There is nothing but freedom.

Desire.

Lasting freedom.

Truth.

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